Hope for the Best

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by barcharonte

Summary

A visit to Beau and a venture into social media swing Will's protective urges for his father into high gear, and Hannibal gets to put his psychiatric experience to good use. They try to deal with the resurgence of Will's mother, but somehow, Beau's seemingly arbitrary house rules pose a bigger issue for them both.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

Abigail was very excited to spend her winter break with Beau. The first and foremost reason was that the man was just the sweetest person she'd known (with possibly the exception of Lily, sorry Pops) and also because seeing him gave her hope that one day, Will would become more like him, i.e. more open to her influence and wrapped around her finger. Then there was the matter of change; having spent most of her life in some forgotten corner of Minnesota, she now welcomed every chance for a change of scenery, from trying out a new restaurant to flying across the ocean.

Last reason was the best: She had managed to convince Lily to come with her.

Will, sharing an amused look over her shoulder with Hannibal about her excited chatter, was happy for her. He was also aware of one more thing.

"There's no place to accommodate us all, Abigail," he said. "Unless of course you'd like to take the floor?"

"We are actually going to stay at that motel Hannibal and I stayed last time," she said, chin raised as if she was challenging Will to say no to that. "He knows the place. It's safe, it's close, and we won't have to keep quiet like you two will have to."

"Hey!" Will raised a hand to stop her. "There's a level of information I'm okay with. This exceeds that. I don't wanna know."

"You are such a prude," Abigail said. "Also good luck sneaking behind Pops' back. There is no way in hell he'll let you two share the couch."

Hannibal straightened up from where he had been crouched over his suitcase. "Is separation a possibility, Will?"

"Not a possibility," Abigail jumped in. "Certainty. In fact, I wouldn't even dream of staying in the same room. You did not see him when the two of you went to the bathroom together after saying you'd take a shower. I could barely keep him down."

Hannibal looked down at the shirt he had been in the process of folding, mindful of smoothing over wrinkles. "Well," he said. "Perhaps, Will, we could consider a motel room ourselves."

"Right," Will murmured. "Tell me. What would it be if we, four people, went to visit my dad and none of us stayed with him? What was that? Did you say rude? Because that's what it would be," he said, adding another pair of boxers to the open suitcase before Hannibal, uncaring that if was not his. "It would be rude," he repeated to make it clear to Hannibal, but in actuality, trying to convince himself of the fact.

"Whatever the host wants, the host gets," Hannibal wore acceptance like an ill-fitting suit. "I can respect his wishes for a week."

"A week?" Abigail chimed in, throwing herself on their bed to sit cross-legged by the suitcases and piles of clothes. "My break is two weeks."

“I will respect separation for one week,” Hannibal explained. “The second week, I will still do so, but grudgingly.”

“Come, now,” Will laughed, wrestling the fifth suit from Hannibal’s hands to hang it back in the wardrobe. “It won’t be so bad. You’ve had me to yourself for half a year. A couple of weeks of limited contact should not be too bad. I bet you are actually looking forward to it,” said, squeezing Hannibal’s arm to let him know it was a jest. “I bet you are bored of me already.”

“That’s right,” Hannibal replied, chin tight even as he played along. “You and oxygen, such tedious qualities you share.”

“Oh please,” Abigail said, and snapped a photo of them. She giggled at the result and started typing furiously, somehow managing to keep talking simultaneously. “It’s just two weeks. Don’t act like it’s the end of the world.”

Will snorted at that. “We are not the ones choosing a seedy motel room over staying with the family, Abigail.”

“We are doing everyone a favour, really,” she said, pausing to read a text she received. “You said it yourself, there’s no space at Pops.”

Will threw in two t-shirts, taking into account how humid it could be over there. “And who have you sent our picture again?”

“Lily,” Abigail said, the soft smile on her face whenever she mentioned her girlfriend firmly in place. “Says she’s going to meet us at the airport.”

“Great,” Will said. Lily had proven herself to be a decent person in the past few weeks. During the dinner she was first introduced to them, she had gotten in Hannibal’s good graces with her decent table manners and her sincere appreciation for the protein-heavy meal he had made with her sportive activities in mind. She had Will at “I work at the shelter, I can arrange a meeting for you and our dogs there!” She was also very hardworking, punctual, took her acting and rowing very seriously, and was overall as positive an influence as anyone could be for Abigail. It definitely did not hurt that she looked at Abigail with hearts in her eyes. Without Abigail noticing, she refilled her glass of water, subtly pushed her knife away from the edge before it could fall, and wiped a bit of sauce at the corner of her lips while also caressing her face. Only her tendency to be a square john was worrying: She had a clear understanding of what was right or wrong, good or bad, and it could be a hindrance if they became more serious in the future. Will knew first hand that accepting darker urges and adopting cannibalism as a life style did not come easy, but he hoped that if it came down to it at one point, love would work in Lily’s favour as it did in Will’s.

Lily had also refused to let Will and Hannibal pay for her ticket, while thanking them profusely for the offer. This meant that they would be travelling in different compartments with Abigail and Lily in economy, and Will and Hannibal in first class. Will thought he could have fought Hannibal harder to also buy economy tickets, but when Hannibal said Abigail would appreciate more alone time with Lily, he had grudgingly accepted being served overpriced orange juice. And warm towels, for some reason.

“The lack of nonstop flights from Paris to New Orleans is something I cannot understand,” Hannibal said. He had to pack lightly so that they would not waste time in the baggage claim, and stopping twice on their way was not something he enjoyed. “The cultures are so entwined that I would have thought the opposite would be the case.”

“We’ll be there before you know it,” Will said, and then furtively added, “And then it will be two weeks before we can share a room. Do you remember what you asked me on our way to Paris?”

“How can I forget?” Hannibal returned, throwing a smirk at Will before deeming their suitcase well packed and zipping it up. “Are you offering, *mylimasis*?”

“I might have been hasty when I refused, before,” Will said, remembering how annoyed he had been that Hannibal was so good at appearing unaffected while Will himself had to talk his erection down with well thought-out arguments and the occasional plea. That thing was very persistent. “I can be persuaded.”

“Guys, Lily says to be extra careful. Even first class bathrooms are not to be trusted when it comes to hygiene, apparently.”

“Are you- Did you- Wha-” Will spluttered. “Abigail Hobbs, we need to talk about what is private and what isn’t. You can’t just go around and tell- and tell-”

“Tell my girlfriend that my lovely uncle and his respectable partner want to enter the mile-high club?” Abigail shrugged. “If you did not want anyone to know, you should not have discussed it with me right here.”

“We didn’t even-” Will started but cut himself off to say instead, “Do you want me to talk to Lily about you? Because I can. I can tell her so much.”

“You have nothing,” Abigail said, but didn’t look as confident as her words implied she was.

“I might have some additions too, my love, if you decide to have a chat with dear Miss Thomas,” Hannibal said with a smirk, his hand snaking around Will’s waist. “I seem to recall one particular night with an unfortunately unlocked door and dislodged headphon-”

“Fine!” Abigail exclaimed and threw herself off of the bed. She could not look at them in the face as she left the room hastily.

Will looked from her quickly retreating back to Hannibal. “I want to ride you so hard right now you have no fucking clue.”

Hannibal spared a glance at the wall clock. “We have exactly twenty minutes before we have to leave, and I have yet to make sure the appliances are unplugged all over the house.”

“Abigail!” Will hollered, hurrying to close the bedroom door. “Unplug everything! We’re leaving in twenty minutes!”

“Ugh fine,” came the muffled response through the closed door but neither Will nor Hannibal gave it a second thought.

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Beau welcomed them in the street by their rental cars in the early evening with a big smile. “Go in, go in,” he said, and his smile didn’t even waver when he saw Hannibal. Abigail’s spying and the obvious improvement in Will’s moods seemed to have worked wonders on the man’s lenience for Hannibal. Beau asked which suitcase was Will’s and let while Hannibal carry his own. Lily and Abigail’s bags were in their own car, parked alongside theirs in the narrow rundown street. Abigail went ahead of them all, and when they entered the house, they found her already sprawled across the couch in the living room.

“Economy has such tiny seats, no leg space,” she whined. Lily went to sit next to her and took her calves on her lap to massage them. Will joined them, taking the armchair closest to Abigail, while Beau headed for the stairs with Will’s baggage. When he noticed Hannibal following him with his own, he shook his head. “Oh no, leave them here. You’re sleeping on the couch.” Without looking back, Beau disappeared upstairs, and Hannibal dejectedly placed his suitcase before the TV unit. He sat on the side of the couch closer to Will, and gave him a look so reminiscent of the puppy dog eyes that Will felt a pang of grief, both for his lack of dogs at the moment and for Hannibal’s sorrow.

“I’ll talk to him,” he said, and held out his hand. Hannibal took it with a pout.

“For a modern man, he sure is quite traditional at times,” he commented.

Abigail straightened next to him and exclaimed, “Right!” She was very animated all of a sudden. “Will, I need to take some pictures of Pops and you! I mean, you need to pose this time.”

“What?” Will asked dumbly. He was too tired from the long flight to be able to make sense of Abigail’s non-sequiturs.

“For his Facebook page,” she said as though it explained everything. “I made him an e-mail address already, and he needs some social media presence now. For that, he needs some good pictures.”

“Let’s wait until I don’t look like death warmed over, though, shall we?” Will said, at which Hannibal looked affronted.

“You look beautiful,” he said, and held onto his hand tighter.

“How do *I* look, Abby?” came the question from Lily, who was openly smirking at her.

“Like how I imagine Ganymede appeared to Zeus,” Abigail answered with an air of enthrallment, causing the rest of them to laugh.

“What’d I miss?” Beau asked came back down and found them laughing.

“Nothing,” Will said, while at the same time Lily said, “Abby was just telling me she wanted to kidnap me and make me work like a slave for her.” Will’s eyes met Hannibal’s as they relayed the same though that, *yes, this one is right for our daughter*.

Beau turned to look at Abigail with both brows raised. “No, no,” she said, flustered, “I was just telling her she looked beautiful-”

“While pouring wine into your cup?” Lily said, looking up at Abigail from under her eyelashes with an air of innocence and making her blush harder.

“I do not condone abduction or slavery, young lady,” Beau said, mock-serious. “And I don’t have wine. Will beer do?”

“Yes, dad,” Will came to Abigail’s rescue. “That sounds great. Let’s drink the beer and refrain from further mythological references for the rest of the evening.”

“Amen to that!” Beau roared, his good nature contagious. Each accepted their own cans with gratitude, except for Lily.

“I shouldn’t…” she trailed off, and to everyone’s surprise, it was Hannibal who said, “Enjoy each moment as if it’s your last, Miss Thomas.” He took a swig from his can, looking for all the world like he drank canned beer on a regular basis. “Some opportunities are not to be missed.”

Lily, who had found Hannibal to be a reasonable and level-headed person so far, took his words to heart and drank up, and was cheered on by Abigail and Beau.

“When’s dinner?” Abigail asked, “I’m starving.”

Will had eaten on the plane. He had ordered beef teriyaki for the sole purpose of messing with Hannibal and having him sneer at the food. Having been spoiled rotten by Hannibal’s cooking, though, Will had found it subpar. He nodded along. “Me too,” he said, and avoided Hannibal’s smug face.

“It’s ‘bout to be done,” Beau said, jovial and enthused. It was obvious that having them around was doing wonders for his mood. Will silently decided to talk to Hannibal about visiting more often. “I made chicken stew with salad,” he added.

“An excellent choice,” Hannibal said, and did not acknowledge Will’s grateful squeeze at his wrist. “Do you need any help?”

“Nah,” Beau said. “I’d rather give y’all the tour!”

“What tour?” Will heard Lily ask Abigail, but before she could receive an answer, Beau got up and went to stand before the bookcase.

“Let’s start with these,” He said, pointing at the frames on the shelves. “I made them myself!” He declared proudly, and proceeded to explain the exact procedures he followed to cut, join, and carve the wood. Will took one look at the pictures and groaned.

“You did not-” he said, which Beau happily interrupted with, “But I did!”

One of the pictures showed Will and Hannibal in the kitchen, both lost within their own tasks. Will was chopping the onions while Hannibal was tasting the sauce for the pasta. The one

below was a screenshot from the video of their slow dance in the study. The one next to it was them napping together within the cloud couch that was big enough to accommodate them both, a lilac blanket covering them up to their necks.

“I like that one the best,” Beau said, and pointed at the picture on the wall of Will and Hannibal sitting on the bench of the harpsichord, Will gazing at Hannibal with a fond look while Hannibal played. “I never could make Will try his hand at music,” Beau continued. “But never mind that- Look at the frames!”

Lily and Abigail dutifully complimented him on his carving skills. Will turned to find Hannibal staring at one of the pictures on a lower shelf: It was a relatively innocent moment where Will was before the computer and Hannibal, his lap full of paper, was looking at him like he put the life on earth. Will knew he had been looking up the usual haunts of a paedophile at large while Hannibal, in possession of personal files thanks to Lionel, was telling him that they needed to monitor the local playgrounds thoroughly. Will had not been happy to hear that, and Hannibal had not been happy to say it, but the devotion in his expression as he tried to aid Will in sating his bloodthirst and enacting his own justice was unmistakeable.

“It worked, you know,” Will said while the girls kept Beau occupied. “He paid for it.”

“What is most peculiar about this snapshot, *mylimasis*,” Hannibal murmured, lifting up a hand to trace the carvings placed lovingly into the frame by Beau, “is how similarly we view the world, and how much better it is to have you in it,” he said.

“And you,” Will whispered. “I pity the version of myself that had to spend his entire life without knowing you.”

“Quantum physics and alternate universes, Will?” Hannibal said, turning his attention from the pictures to Will now. “I didn’t know we shared that interest as well.”

“Anything in the way of me having you by my side,” Will murmured, careful not to disturb the others’ conversation, “is my area of interest, Hannibal.”

Hannibal gave him a wan smile. “Pity that does not include your father’s rules against us sharing a bed,” he said. Will could nonetheless see in those dark, fathomless eyes the density with which Hannibal experienced his love and devotion.

“You have me forever,” he said, apropos to nothing. “You have me for good, my love.”

“And you have me,” Hannibal said, tracing Will’s cheekbones with the back of a finger, the action somehow more reverent than it deserved to be under the circumstances.

“Did you get it?” They heard Beau say, and it was Lily that answered.

“Oh yes,” she said mischievously. “I got it alright.” She spared Will and Hannibal an apologetic gaze before sending the picture to Beau.

Will scowled in Abigail's direction. "You are a bad influence on her," he said, but it was for show and they all knew it. Beau looked down at his phone warmly and said, "This will go in the kitchen, I think," before shaking it off and leading them to the backyard.

"I'm making these too!" He looked so proud as he showed them the six chair dining table in the backyard. The table was finished and varnished, whereas the chairs were plain yet. "I finished the big work in the workshop, but brought them to do put the elbow grease here." Half the grassy patches before the door had been cemented, and the table and chairs were on it. Beau had installed a sun shade to protect the area, too. When they were finished, this would be a nice space to have meals and spend time. Will also loved that Beau had opted for a six-top; for a man who previously had only two folding lawn chairs, it was a touching sentiment.

Hannibal was looking at the blooms of flowers separating the cement from the rest of the yard.

"White daffodils and daisies," he commented, "for revival." Will knew to trust him when it came to flower languages, for Hannibal had used it often enough in his Ripper tableaux. "Very fitting," he added with reverence.

"Just got what the florist down the street had, but thanks I guess," was Beau's gruff but pleased response. He then spent some time explaining which tools he used to carve out which patterns, and the girls perplexed Will by showing a level of interest he thought girls their age would not have in woodwork.

"He's full of surprises," Hannibal said, drawing Will close with one arm around his shoulders. "Just like you."

"Did you whisper into his chrysalis too?" Will asked, trying to jog Hannibal out of his reverie, but loving that he could appreciate Beau.

"I have done my fair share of whispering, my love," Hannibal turned to nuzzle into his neck. "You alone have proved to me that I only needed to have whispered into one, and one alone."

"Same here," Will said, keeping his eyes on Abigail's fingers as she traced them over the patterns drawn on it. "I may not have done any whispering, but yours was it for me all the same."

"Oh, my dear, you whispered into my chrysalis alright," Hannibal said, looking all too incongruent in Beau's backyard with his three-piece but somehow making it seem like he belonged there all the same. "You've changed me, maybe more than I've changed you," he whispered, leaning down to let one thumb rest on a white petal. "You don't know the full extent of what you have blessed me with," he said.

"I can only hope it's half as good as what you've given me," Will murmured. Although he had been quiet, Hannibal heard him and straightened up to embrace him.

"So do I, sweet William," he whispered into his hair. "So do I."

“Did you get that?” They heard Beau ask again. Something told Will that he’d be hearing that particular question often during their visit.

“I got it,” was Abigail’s reply, and with a roll of his eyes, Will left them to it and led Hannibal inside.

“He may be against us spending the night together,” he explained while they climbed the stairs, “but he can’t have anything to say about an early evening nap after a long flight.” He made sure Hannibal was devoid of any article of clothing that could be classified as formal before he got them beneath the covers of the queen-size guest bed. He eyed the now-familiar engravings on the bedframe. “He made these too,” he idly remarked as he settled into Hannibal’s arms, breathing his scent where it was the strongest in the nook of his neck.

Hannibal, likewise, held on and let them drift off to sleep, confident that one of the others would wake them for dinner.

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“I can’t believe you didn’t tell me you won a national art competition in high school, Abby,” Lily said.

“It was nothing,” Abigail said, but her eyes strayed up to the piece hung below the sconce on the backyard wall. They were seated on the unfinished chairs, making use of Beau’s new dinner table. From where they were situated, the copy of Abigail’s painting was entirely visible and Beau made no effort to deny that its placement was deliberate. It was a cubist depiction of the two people she had felt a kinship to right after her parents died, on her last year of high school.

“Not what I heard,” Beau said, waving his fork excitedly. “It’s displayed in the parliament building!”

“Not a big deal, really,” Abigail murmured and returned Lily’s squeeze of her hand on her lap. Will and Hannibal looked suspiciously innocent as they regarded her award-winning painting.

“It looks awfully familiar, does it not?” Hannibal commented, to which Will replied, “As though the artist was intimately acquainted with her subjects.” He had learned a lot about sounding pretentious and pedantic during his outings at Parisian art galleries with Hannibal and Abigail. Right now, he was displaying just how well he’d gotten at mimicking them. “It’s as if she had a firm grasp at the inner workings of the subjects, exposing their severity with sharp corners and their softness with the smooth transition between shades,” he concluded. The glare he received from Abigail was enough of a reward for his effort.

“It was just a bunch of assholes, *ma chérie*,” she said to Lily, who raised an eyebrow in disbelief. “Nothing more to it.”

“Wait,” Beau said, waving his fork towards the painting. “Are these-”

“Nope,” Abigail said. “There are not my uncle and his lover. I, uh, made them up,” she finished lamely. “They are made up,” she said with a conviction that fooled no one in the dinner table. “How’s that Facebook page going?” she asked Beau, desperate for a change of topic. While Will and Hannibal took a nap upstairs, Lily and Abigail had set his account and arranged for an impromptu photoshoot. It had resulted in very flattering headshots of the man, and slightly hilarious takes of him doing random stuff around the house, clearly under the demand to ‘pretend we’re not here.’

“I have a ‘friend’s request’ already,” Beau said, a troubled frown now on his face as he looked at his phone. “Will, do you know any Lindas? ‘Cause I know no Lindas, and one sent me a ‘friend’s request.’”

“I don’t have a Facebook page, dad,” Will replied, “And I don’t know any Lindas either.”

“People add people they don’t know all the time,” Lily said. “Perhaps this is a woman who is seeking your romantic interests, Mr. Graham,”

“Call me Beau, dear,” Beau said, and with a slight scowl, he added, “I don’t want to give anyone my romantic interest, though.”

“Just accept her friendship request,” Abigail said as if it was very simple. “Give her a chance to tell you why she added you. If she doesn’t say anything, you can always unfriend her.”

“I guess,” Beau said, scratching his beard. “I have to say you kids have made communication much more complex than it needs to be nowadays.”

“It’s the way of the century,” Lily mused, “I’d have liked it to be simpler, too. You have to have a lot of foreknowledge to be able to navigate through the communications.”

“Why does she sound like you?” Will leaned in and asked Hannibal quietly.

“Maybe she has read books other than those in her high school syllabus, my love,” was the answer he received.

“I’m very well-read,” Will said, chin high. “Remember who deciphered the elaborate references in your displays at a single glance.”

“Darling, how can I ever forget,” Hannibal said, and before Will could object, stole a close-mouthed kiss from him. Beau, upon seeing it, sighed mournfully.

“I guess you didn’t get that, did you Abby?” he asked.

“Nope,” Abigail popped her ‘p.’ “Give it another ten minutes. I’m sure I’ll catch the next one.”

“That’s the spirit,” Beau said, and listened as Lily told him wacky stories about people meeting online.

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For all Will's protests, Beau remained steadfast in his determination that he would be staying alone in the guest bedroom.

"Dad, we are grown-ass men," Will hissed, trying to keep it down so Hannibal did not hear him with his hound ears.

"Grown-ass men I don't trust to keep things innocent," Beau shot back.

"Are you afraid we'll get pregnant?" Will jabbed. Hannibal was right when he said indignation made Will rude. Beau threw such a look of reprimand at the question that Will immediately looked at the floor in shame.

"No, not that. I'm afraid you will try really hard for it, though," Beau huffed. "Do you really want your old man to be traumatized like that, Will? My room is next door."

"I get it," Will said. "Sorry."

"And I made this such a good room too," Beau said, looking around the guest bedroom with an appreciative gaze. Will remembered that this had been used for both storage and laundry. In the time between his two visits, Beau had gone through the boxes here, and shared everything therein about Will with Abigail. Will looked at the "Fish-Will-Dad" drawing that was hanging over the bed in one of Beau's handmade frames, and sighed. It was a lost battle.

"I like what you did with it," he said instead. "Feels more spacious, for sure."

"Right?" Beau asked, and opened the window to show Will the mosquito net he had installed. "And now you won't be eaten alive while you sleep!"

Will smiled. "It's really good to see you so… I don't know. Animated? Lively?" Beau snorted in response. "The workshop, the projects, this bed, everything. I'm happy for you, dad."

"I'll be the first to admit it feels weird." Beau scratched his nape, looking uncomfortable. A beep came from his pocket, and he reached for the phone. "I never realized how stale everything'd gotten before you barged into my life with a murderer and an adopted daughter at your heels!" Will laughed at the absurdity of it all.

"When you put it like that-" he started but was promptly interrupted.

"Charlie and Meredith accepted my friend requests! They are from class." Will watched his father's childlike excitement and thought that perhaps their infamous sad bastard genes were finally mutating.

*

When the girls came for breakfast in the morning and suggested a day at the park, Beau had been all too happy to take them up on their offer. Will helped Hannibal prepare food for the picnic while the others whipped out their phones to find the best location possible for the excursion. Alone for the first time since their nap yesterday, Will sidled up to him and pressed a kiss on his shoulder. "Slept well?"

Hannibal did not even spare him a glance. “I was comfortable, thank you.”

“We can always switch,” Will offered. “I am rather fond of that old couch, you know.”

“You’ve had your fair share of it,” Hannibal said, remembering that just half a year ago, it had been Will’s bed for an indefinite future. “Besides, at the rate Beau is going, I’m sure he’ll soon replace it with something he made himself. I don’t mean to disrespect his talents, but I have to say that at this point, anything will be an improvement.”

“I hear you,” Will said, and placed the club sandwiches Hannibal made in a plastic container. “I also hear that you are a very picky chef.”

“You heard correctly,” Hannibal raised an eyebrow at him. “But I fail to see what that has anything to do with this.”

“It’s just that someone picky like you is sure to take a long time doing grocery shopping,” Will said as he packed a few bottles of water to the bag. “Like, hours long.”

Hannibal placed the apples he’d been washing into their own container but left it on the counter to walk up to Will, getting so close that Will had to look up a bit to meet his eyes. “That, too, is correct. I also need assistance.”

“I’m offering,” Will said before Hannibal could finish speaking, his hands finding their place on Hannibal’s chest. “Take me shopping, Hannibal.”

“Today?” Hannibal asked, completely serious.

“Yes,” Will said. “We’ll take off in a couple hours so we can shop for tonight’s dinner.”

Now that a plan to spend some time together was vaguely in place, Hannibal’s amusement shone through. “The copse?”

“The motel, like civilized people,” Will slapped him lightly on the chest. “I don’t want a repeat of *that* walk of shame.”

“Since we have to leave early, we had better not make them wait any longer now.” Hannibal leaned in for a short kiss, full of promise. Afterwards, Will withdrew to hastily push the box of fruits into the bag. He ignored Hannibal’s chuckle and went to face the music.

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“I want one of these for home,” Will said, looking up at Hannibal from under his eyelashes. He was kneeling on a plump swivel chair, supporting his upper body on the back of it, and stroking Hannibal with both hands. He gave the head a teasing lick, and rubbed it at his smiling lips. “I love it.”

Hannibal’s usually immaculate hair was in a disarray, sweaty strands falling down over his dark eyes. “I love it too,” he murmured, and pressed a thumb to Will’s lower lip. With one last smirk, Will complied, opening up and letting Hannibal’s weight settle on his tongue. He moved not his head but his tongue, running it along the veins underneath and applying soft

and firm sucks one after the other, letting both of them savour the sensations quietly. He kept his eyes on Hannibal the entire time, loving how unravelled he looked, how he breathed softly through his mouth and how the hair on his chest caught the daylight, all of it making him appear entirely masculine and entirely *his*.

"Will," Hannibal sighed, before beginning to move his hips in small, shallow thrusts. Will closed his eyes as he felt the head push into his throat, gone before he could do anything about it. If going slow was his way of torturing Hannibal, it did a number on himself as well. When it all came down to it, witnessing Hannibal losing his control took priority over everything. Moving his hands from Hannibal's cock to grip his hips, Will buried his nose in his groin and let his throat give the admonishment he couldn't. Hannibal's quiet gasp above him was all the feedback he needed before he withdrew, rubbing his lips along the length and breathing in his lover's scent. The moment he felt he gained his breath back, he took Hannibal back in deep, deeper, moving his head in shallow motions as if he was trying to choke on his cock and making the most obscene sounds in the process.

"*Mylimasis*," Hannibal breathed. The slight hitch in his breath was familiar to Will now, telling him that- ah, yes. He adjusted the angle when Hannibal reached forward and slipped a finger into his hole, rubbing in the lube that remained from their joined efforts earlier to prepare him. Will moaned around the cock in his throat and breathed through his nose as one finger became two became three and, unexpectedly, became four. Hannibal was not going to hold back, it said. Will was going to feel him as he laid on his lonely bed up in his bedroom, and ache for it all over again.

Will released Hannibal and replaced his mouth with both hands once again, one reaching down to hold his sack while the other stroked, firmly and with a twist at the end, his lips at the base giving open mouthed kisses.

Suddenly, the swivel chair was, well, swivelled. Will held onto the back while the room spun, and with a sharp thrust, he was breached up to the hilt. He moaned into the sheet Hannibal insisted on buying along with the groceries and draping over the chair for a more hygienic experience, and loved him for both the prissiness and the abandon with which he was thrusting into him.

"So good," he moaned. "You feel so good in me, love," he said, cheek pressed against the back as he was pounded. In response, Hannibal tightened his grip on Will's hips, fingers digging in hard enough to bruise, just as Will liked. Will tilted his hips up as much as he could, his back arched to a point just shy of uncomfortable, and moaned again. He didn't care for the sounds he was making now that they were safely away from the family, and it felt so good to let himself enjoy this, so naughty to have Hannibal like this in a modest motel room.

Hannibal let go of one hip to grasp Will by the hair, and pulled him so that he was bent backwards, his head on Hannibal's shoulder, his lover's grunts in his ear making the experience that much more intimate. The thrusts were fast and hard, and Will revelled in it, knowing he was going to be sore afterwards.

"How do you do it," Hannibal was saying now, his husky murmurs causing precome to drip from Will's cock onto the brand new sheets. "How do you make me ache for you so much

that one day without this," He licked along the strained tendons in Will's neck, "feels like eternity?"

"Whatever it is, you do it too," Will said, reaching behind for Hannibal's hand to bring it to his throat. Hannibal dutifully wrapped his fingers there, and began to squeeze lightly. He used his other arm to hold Will, fully enveloping him in a lustful embrace.

Will was beyond sounds now, both due to the hand on his neck and the overloading of sensations. He could only hold onto Hannibal's arm across his chest as he was well and truly fucked and his earlobe was sucked into that hungry mouth. He came on a particularly hard thrust that stimulated his prostate perfectly, surprising even himself as come spurted out from his untouched cock. Hannibal bit his earlobe and with a growl, slipped from Will. He twirled the chair harshly until he had Will's face before him, and stroked himself to orgasm, grunting as stripes of come fell on Will's face. Will, for his part, remained still for Hannibal, allowing the grip at his hair to position him to Hannibal's liking, and looked up at him with brilliant blue eyes, smiling as he gathered some of the come from the corner of his lips with his tongue and swallowed it.

"You will be the death of me," Hannibal said once he could find the breath to do so. Will took it as his cue to move and so he did, and took Hannibal into his hand, nuzzling along the length languidly. Hannibal, entranced, collected the come on his cheek and pushed it past Will's lips, which was also licked and gulped down. "Is this a part of your plan, Agent Graham, to bring me down?"

Will huffed out a laugh. "It's former Special Agent Graham for you," he said, and let his head rest on the chair's back as his hair was stroked. "And it's a bit too high on our body count to catch you, don't you think? Redundant, even."

"You've caught me alright," Hannibal said, and leaned down to kiss Will's lax lips, tasting himself and revelling in the knowledge that this was his to take whenever he wanted. "I've been dangling on your hook from the beginning, and loving every second of it."

"Sap," Will said with a light slap on Hannibal's shoulder. "Let me up. We need a shower, then we need to be on our way."

"I thought we could afford to shop a bit longer," Hannibal said, but straightened up and helped Will to his feet. "I am so very picky, after all."

"Hmm, but it's almost sunset," Will replied with a regretful glance at the window. The light from outside, while muffled by the curtains, was turning a bright orange. "And we need to ration these out. There's only so much produce that kitchen can take, after all."

"All the more reason to convince Beau for a renovation," Hannibal said, and with a slap to Will's bottom, went into the bathroom, leaving the door open in an invitation. Rubbing the slap mark where his skin was hot and reddening, Will made a mental note to give it another, more extensive go next time, and followed.

*

“If this’ what I get for your absurdly long shopping trips, son,” Beau said during dinner, “I think I can get used to it.”

Abigail and Lily giggled while Will pretended that the comment was not about him at all. Hannibal, unaffected and poised as always, said, “A good meal deserves attention to detail.” He then smiled, and winked when he caught Abigail’s gaze. “We are what we eat, are we not?”

Abigail laughed harder and Will rubbed his eyes with a sigh. “Hannibal, for fuck’s sake.” But regardless of how little he appreciated puns with Beau and Lily around, the good mood stayed with them well after the dinner. Before it, of course, came crashing down.

A beep from Beau’s phone was not unusual anymore. He had expanded his friends list considerably in just one day, and likes on his pictures was increasing. The cover photo he chose from Abigail’s takes was of him and Will, smiling at the camera with their arms around each other’s shoulders that very morning, the background that of the silent corner of the park they chose for their picnic. Combined with his dashing profile picture, it was an alright profile for a man of Beau’s age, at least according to Abigail.

This last beep, however, had the man pick up his phone to check. Whatever he read made his face blank and the rest of him tense. He excused himself and went upstairs to his room. The rest of them, sprawled around the living room, watched his departure in silence barring the sounds of the TV, and heard him turn the lock on his door clearly.

“What?” Will said eloquently. He was a bit buzzed, both from the fine day they’d had and the *creme de menthe* he and Hannibal found in the store they visited before moving on to the motel. Lily was going to drive and she wasn’t used to drinking much so she was sober, but the same couldn’t be said of Abigail who echoed Will’s statement from where she was slouched next to him on the couch. “What?”

“Perhaps someone should check on him,” Hannibal said, the liqueur glass tiny in his hands.

“I’ll go,” Will said and got up. The TV volume was lowered as he ascended. He knocked on Beau’s door lightly.

“Dad?” he called, “Are you alright? What happened?”

“Give your old man some room, why don’t ya!” came the irritated reply. Memories of Beau acting irritated and snappish were distant, a thing of the past when Will had knobbly knees, and baby fat on his cheeks. Standing before the closed door now, all grown up, he felt that small again. He was about to say something about talking later and going back downstairs when the door was unlocked and cracked open. Will looked up to see Beau, eyes red rimmed.

“Just,” Beau started but sighed before he could continue. “Sorry, boy. Just give me a minute. I’ll talk to you. Just not right now.”

“Dad…” Will did not know what to do, or what could have elicited this response from his father. “Okay,” he said in the end, and they nodded at each other. When Will got downstairs, the door closing behind him silently, he was frowning.

“What happened?” Abigail asked, looking slightly soberer now. Hannibal, too, was gazing at Will inquisitively.

“He says he wants to be alone,” Will said. It felt wrong, for some reason, to be in the living room. “I’ll be in the backyard, getting some air.” Then he noticed the worried looks from the girls and forced a smile on his face. “Don’t worry, if it was important I’m sure he’d have told us by now.” With that, fully aware that he did nothing to appease the girls, he went out to the yard. Beau’s pack of cigarettes and his lighter were on the table, and he helped himself to them. Then he yelled at the window upstairs. “Hey dad?”

Beau opened his window and the mosquito net. “What?” he said with a scoff. Will threw first the pack, then the lighter through his window. “Thank you, Willy,” Beau said, choked, before he disappeared inside.

Say what you would about the Graham men, but they knew to give each other what they needed when they needed it. Will drew in a breath from the cigarette and watched, amused, as a puff of white smoke drifted from Beau’s window.

“Abigail and Miss Thomas left for the night,” Hannibal said as he joined Will. He sat down beside Will on the unfinished chairs, and ran a thumb on the side engravings. “They expect updates through the night if something happens, though.”

“You can call her Lily, you know,” Will murmured.

“Not yet, my love. She has yet to prove herself.”

“What do you expect from her?” Will asked, exhaling the smoke from his mouth. “The head of a gorgon?”

“Nothing so drastic,” Hannibal said with a slight tilt of his head. “Let her get us the puppies she promised, first.”

“I thought puppies were the way to my heart,” Will huffed out a laugh.

“The way to your heart, darling, is also the way to mine.” Hannibal brought his hands together on his lap and crossed his legs, looking regal and dignified as though he was in his office during one of their ‘conversations,’ as though he had commented on a case instead of confessing his love. Will felt himself relax a little.

“I don’t like it when he’s upset,” he said quietly, aware that the window above was still open. Hannibal followed his gaze, and replied in a similar manner.

“Family values may have declined over the last century, but we still help our families when we can. Whatever it is, he has us, and we will help.”

“You have no idea how much hearing that means to me,” Will said, but after a pause and a raised eyebrow from Hannibal, he added, “But you *do* know, don’t you?”

Hannibal looked at him, his narrowed eyes wistful and fond. “I do,” he said, and Will made a decision there.

“Come, then,” he said, putting out the cigarette in the ashtray before getting up. “I hear that the couch needs to be replaced. I need to check for myself before I allow that transaction.”

“You’ll sleep with me?”

“No, I’ll be assessing the couch until the morning, and you’ll be there too.” Will smirked over his shoulder. “That’s my official statement and I’ll stick with it.”

“What a clever boy you are,” Hannibal said. They got their night routines out of the way before meeting by the couch. Setting the sheets and pillows on it, they laid on their sides facing the TV, the light from the screen the only light in the living room. Will was behind Hannibal, the arm he draped over his waist also holding the remote, as he idly changed channels. The last thing he remembered seeing was a slasher movie, and the last thing he heard was Hannibal’s derisive, “*Amateurs*.”

*

When Beau came down for breakfast, he was met with four pairs of eyes. “Oh, calm down, all of you,” he said sullenly, and squeezed himself into the chair at the head of the table. The others, sharing the tiny space around the kitchen table- Abigail with her plate on her lap and a bit farther from the table than the rest to fit in- averted their gazes. Will, closest to Beau, resisted the urge to do the same.

“What happened last night, dad?”

Beau sighed and rubbed his slightly swollen eyes, looking very tired and showing all his years if not more. Will was worried that whatever made his dad spend the night crying was going to require the use of their murder suits, which they left back at home so as not to tempt themselves during their visit.

“Remember Linda?” Beau said when he eventually felt more composed.

Will did a double-take. “What, the friend request?”

“That very one. Well, she messaged me,” he said, aware of everyone staying very quiet and listening carefully, while he reached for the serving plates to fill his plate with sausage, omelette, and greens. “Turns out I knew her, after all.”

“Dad…” Will said. Hannibal looked at him, recognizing the impatience in his tone. Beau appeared to recognize it as well, for he continued.

“One of your mother’s friends, from her summer break,” Beau said. “Turns out they’ve been talking about me, and then she looked me up and…”

Beau trailed off. The gazes turned from him to Will now, who was very still now. Beau was reluctant to look, but when he did, he was met with Will’s blank face. “I have her number,” he finished. He was not talking about Linda now, that much was clear.

Will stared at him. Then he stared down at his half empty plate. Hannibal was going to be sore if he left it unfinished.

“Did you call?” He asked. Beau shook his head. “Will you call?” Will asked again. Beau looked down. Without any expressions on his face, Will said, “It’s okay, dad,” in a monotonous, quiet way. “It’s okay.” Will then thought Hannibal was just going to have to make his peace with an uneaten breakfast for once and got up. “Excuse me,” he murmured, and left the kitchen. A few moments later the front door opened and closed softly, and he was gone.

Hannibal’s eyes went to Will’s phone on the table, left behind. Abigail began to fidget, and Lily turned to her in question. Beau was frowning at his plate as if it offended him. “He is fine,” Hannibal broke the uneasy silence. “He needs some time to process this alone,” he said when his eyes met Beau’s, and he nodded in reassurance, and received a resigned nod in return. “I will go get him in a few hours.”

“Do you know where he went?” Abigail asked, reaching to touch Will’s phone.

“I have an idea.”

*

New Orleans air in February was mild, milder than that of Virginia or Paris at least, but not enough to lay on the copse floor for an extended period at any rate. It was especially not as hot as the day he and Hannibal had their confrontation and the ensuing make-out session here back in August.

This was why Will was happy to see Hannibal come bearing the coat he forgot to take when he left the house. Sitting up, he made to take it, but Hannibal ignored him and wrapped it around Will himself, right before he sat down cross-legged next to him.

“You’ll dirty your pants,” Will said absently. Hannibal gave a long suffering sigh.

“If I had known the havoc you’d wreak on my wardrobe, I would have kept away from you.”

“Would you have?” Will asked, sounding small. Hannibal reassessed his approach immediately.

“No,” he said resolutely, leaving no room for doubt. “I still have not had the suit from our last visit cleaned.”

Will knew it. The grey three-piece with thin red pinstripes was in a casing of its own in their wardrobe, with grass stains on the knees and back, and blood splatters on the front. He had thought to tease Hannibal for keeping it that way, but then let the thought pass because he, too, was fond of the memory. Hannibal had taken a beating that day, both *for* Will and *from* Will, and it was a nice thing to have a memento of it.

Will shuffled closer to Hannibal, and didn’t resist it when he was taken under one arm protectively. Against the cold or the thoughts in his own mind, Will didn’t know. Both, probably.

“You know almost everything I know about her,” Will said. “She left him first, and then she left me with him. I never knew her.” Scowling at the weak patch of grass by his feet, he filled Hannibal’s deliberate silence. “I never even looked her up. Not once, even when I had the FBI database under my fingertips.”

“She didn’t deserve your attention,” Hannibal interpreted.

“She *doesn’t* deserve it.” Will snorted. “All these years… I’ve seen so much, can imagine all these scenarios for why she’d never come back. Could’ve died, gone to jail, been sick. I still don’t know what happened to her, but to find dad through a friend… on *Facebook*, no less…”

“You would have preferred it if she had been unable to find you, to her being unwilling or uncaring.” Hannibal said. He had a way of seeing right through Will. “A reasonable excuse for your abandonment.”

“To think I could ever do what she did to me to Abigail,” Will said, the shiver that ran down his spine both from the cold and from the thought. Hannibal’s hold on him tightened. “A reasonable excuse is the least I could expect. But Hannibal, I don’t.” Will drew back a bit so he could look at him in the eyes. “When I was little, yes, but now? I don’t need a mother. She wasn’t there when I needed her, and now I don’t care why she did what she did.”

“You are worried about your father.”

“He just began to open up,” Will looked up at the scarce leaves on the branches above them. “All my life he’d been so secluded, made few friends, went from work to home to work, rinse and repeat. It’s so weird seeing him, I don’t know, so *alive* I guess. A good kind of weird, if it makes sense.”

“It does,” Hannibal said. “I feel something similar whenever I remember your life in Wolf Trap.”

“I wasn’t nursing a broken heart though,” Will said. Hannibal didn’t reply, but in that, he made his thoughts known. “I was not that way because I never knew the woman who gave birth to me, Hannibal.”

“Family leaves marks, Will,” Hannibal said. “Some with their presence, some with their absence, but they always do.”

Will considered this. “She’s left enough marks on dad with her absence. I don’t want her to leave more, with her presence.”

Hannibal reached for his chin, making sure Will’s attention was on him before allowing a slight smirk on his face. “Have I ever told you what I like most about your father, Will?” When Will shook his head, he continued. “I like that he is very protective. I took a shovel to the head if you remember. He did not hold back on that,” Will huffed and made to turn away, but Hannibal held fast. “I like that, but what I like more is that he knew I was a murderer, knew most of what I’ve put you through, and yet, he let you leave the continent with me. He didn’t call the police or the FBI, he didn’t try to stop you from seeing me, he didn’t even try to keep you here with him. What does that say about him, Will?”

“That he’s not right in the head?” Will replied, but it was a weak attempt at diversion.

“It means he trusted you enough to know what’s best for yourself. It means he put your autonomy and happiness before his own concerns, moral or otherwise. It means, my love,” Hannibal tightened his grip on Will’s chin, “that he let you live. Won’t you do the same for him?”

It was the right thing to say, for Will let the tension leave his body with a deep sigh and nuzzled against the hand on his face, mumbling, “Dating a psychiatrist, what was I thinking?”

“Whatever he decides, you owe him respect for it. You don’t have to like it, but you owe it to him to give him your support.”

“I know,” Will said. “God, don’t you think I know that?” Will crossed his legs, and reached for the grass once again, emphasizing his words by ripping fistfuls of it. “I *will* support him and I *will* respect his decisions. But if she breaks his heart, *again*…”

“Let us leave that particular shovel talk for later, my love,” Hannibal said, leaning in to breathe in Will’s scent, nose rubbing against his scalp. “But if it ever comes to pass, I’ll ask you to let me be present for it. I shall like a chance to see one relayed from son to mother.”

“Our lives are not a spectacle, you lunatic. That exact curiosity was what made it so hard for us in the beginning, if you recall.”

“I’m sure I will be forgiven for it in this particular case,” Hannibal said confidently. When it succeeded in drawing a chuckle from Will, filling him with an intense affection, he got up and held out a hand to help him up. Will took it, and the first thing he did upon standing was making sure no leaves stuck to Hannibal. The grooming was returned.

“This place,” Will said, laughing suddenly when Hannibal grabbed his ass under the guise of getting rid of dry bits of leaves. “Whenever I come here I behave like a teenager. First we rut on the floor, and now I’m throwing a tantrum about my parents.”

“And I encourage you to pursue your urges as they come, darling,” Hannibal said, using his grip on Will’s back to draw him in.

“You just want to finish what we couldn’t back then,” Will said. Hannibal wasn’t the only one capable of reading the other like an open book.

“If that is an offer, I must say it does hold a certain charm. But, alas, Abigail is worried and I believe Beau feels guilty already. We should head back, unless you’d like them to suffer longer.”

“You’d let me stay if I said I did, wouldn’t you?” Will was so fond of Hannibal at that moment. *This man, this man, this man…* rang through his head on a loop. This man would let the world burn if it was what Will, in his caprice and malevolence, asked for it.

“I would,” Hannibal replied, even though they both knew he did not have to. They left arm in arm, struggling slightly to move through the dense trees but not letting go of each other anyway.

*

When they got home, Will wasted no time to dig out his father’s fishing gears from the closets. He passed the newest clothes among them to Beau while choosing some of the older ones for himself. Beau accepted without words, and after a small search through the house for everything they may need and giving reassuring looks for Abigail, they set off for Lake Pontchartrain in Will’s old car. It was a twenty-minute ride with none of them yet ready to be the one to talk first. The pier Will chose was one he had accompanied Beau to during his previous visits, and it allowed them to fish while keeping themselves dry. Will wordlessly grabbed Beau’s previously oft-used pair of folding chairs while Beau took the rest from the car trunk, and they made their way down the vacant pier to where the water would be the deepest and the visitors, if any came, easily detectable. It was only after they took their seats and cast their lines that Will, feeling awkward but determined to power through this, began.

“It’s not that I think I have any say in this.” Will had been fishing since he could hold a rod, so he knew the exact volume to use to be heard without spooking the fish. When Beau made to protest, Will shook his head. “No, let me. It’s your life. You alone choose what to do about this thing. Call her or don’t, I have your back.”

“She’s your mother, and you are my son,” Beau said, also quietly. “You have every right to say something, boy.”

“You knew her,” Will kept his eyes on the horizon. The early afternoon sun was bright and it was a clear day, but the slight wind from the lake made him glad he’d chosen some of the heavier clothes for the excursion. “I never did.”

“She’s still your mother,” Beau repeated. “That don’t change even if you want it to.”

“Perhaps,” Will conceded. “What also doesn’t change is that you mourned her loss and had to raise me alone, without even a single reasonable excuse.” Feeling he was losing his hard-earned composure, he began again, remembering and drawing from his talk with Hannibal for structure. “I just don’t want her to hurt you with her presence, as she did with her absence.”

“I see your mouth flapping, boy, but I hear your fella talking,” Beau said, a smile audible in his voice. Will snorted softly.

“You know he’s better with words. He might have reframed my thoughts for me, but they are still my thoughts.” Will finally turned his head to look at his father. “I don’t care what she is to me, daddy,” he said, using the name he only used to call Beau when he felt emotional and volatile. “If she hurts you, I will want to strangle the life out of her.” Beau’s sharp look did little to soften Will’s words. “This is me being entirely honest. Know this, dad; anything that harms you, I *will* want to eliminate. But,” Will said, eager to assure Beau all the same. “I will not do anything you don’t want me to.”

“If I decide to call her,” Beau said, drawing out the words carefully, his heavy gaze still on Will. “She will be safe?”

“Yes,” Will replied, unconsciously mimicking Beau’s speech, his accent growing heavier in a bid to show sincerity. “If you want her safe, she’ll be safe.”

Beau looked at the horizon. Will saw the lines around his eyes and mouth, put there more by the frowns than the laughter. He took in the sallowness of the skin that came from a lifetime of drinking and smoking. He saw the slump of the shoulders and the slightly lopsided stance, shaped by years of hard work to raise a child all by himself. He saw, and he felt a burning desire inside himself to seek out the cause of all these now that he had a target, but took care to quell it. He would behave, and he would do so gladly if it meant Beau got whatever he wanted.

“I don’t know what I will do yet, Willy,” Beau said at the end. “I want answers, don’t get me wrong. I wanna know the life she had, the life for which she left you. I know I told you I loved her still, but love ain’t nothing where you are concerned. She needs to answer not for me, but for you.” Some of the fire Will felt inside was reflected back at him when their eyes met. “I wanna know why my son never knew no mother.”

Will swallowed hard around the lump in his throat, but it did little to help. “It doesn’t matter,” he said eventually. “I’m a grown-ass man now, remember?”

“A grown-ass man who never knew his mother,” Beau shot back again. “And the only person who can tell why is out there, somewhere, waiting for a call from me.”

Will sighed. “I am with you,” he said, an air of finality to his words. “Whatever you decide, you have me in your corner.”

“Thank you, kiddo,” Beau said, and foregoing the main principle of fishing, moved the rod to his other hand so he could reach out to Will, who accepted the grip with a slight smile.

“We’ll go hungry tonight if you keep that up,” he said mockingly.

“With the way you and your man stocked my fridge yesterday?” Beau snorted loud enough that any fish that lingered around after that had to be dead already. “I don’t think so!”

Will chuckled, and felt the air between them grow easy again. Somehow, knowing that his dad was mainly concerned with getting answers on his behalf was comforting. It reminded Will that, no matter what they might want, family would come first, always.

*

They returned home in the early evening with nothing to show for their troubles. They had kept talking about this and that, and with neither of them caring enough to keep quiet after they reached a concord, no fish tugged on their lines. Their cheeks were slightly burned where the hats could not protect, and the open air had done wonders for their mood. Abigail opened the door for them, and took one look at their faces before she relaxed.

"*Ma chérie*," she called for her girlfriend, who had been in the kitchen with Hannibal. "What do you say we take that walk now?"

"I was ready last week," Lily said, eagerly joining Abigail by the door, all too happy for a chance to stretch her legs. "I deteriorate at stagnation."

"I'll keep you moving, don't you worry," Abigail said, and let herself be tickled on her sides before pushing Lily out of the house. She called out over her shoulder at them, "We'll talk later, misters," before they jogged away.

"What's with her?" Beau asked, smiling at her antics still.

"They have been unwilling to leave the house before they knew you two were alright," Hannibal said, leaning from the kitchen door to greet them. "They wanted to call and ask, and grew frustrated when none of you contacted them. The term, I believe, is 'stir-crazy.'"

Beau laughed, loud and cheerful, which made Will feel even more content. He joined Hannibal in the kitchen and allowed himself to be kissed on the lips. The counter had chopped up piles of greens, onion, and tomato for a salad, and Hannibal was preparing a mix of black pepper, cornflour and crushed garlic; a dressing, no doubt, for fried fish.

"But we got nothing," he said. "Not even a nibble."

"I was prepared for the possibility," Hannibal said, nodding towards a container filled with milk, covering fillets from what Will assumed was the two moderate-sized flounders Beau caught on his latest trip. "And I thought something simple would suit tonight's meal. Comfort food, if you will."

"You're making me fried fish," Will said, taking care not to touch the counters with his dirty hands so as not to contaminate the food and trigger a lecture from Hannibal about food hygiene. "Admit it, Doctor Lecter. You are whipped."

"I may be so, but I am also man enough to admit it," Hannibal looked up from his work to give Will a wide grin, all crooked teeth and thinned lips. "Can you say the same for yourself?"

"I can, and I will when I think you won't be so smug about it," Will said. Leaning forward, he pressed a kiss on Hannibal's cheek, and was startled out of it when Beau exclaimed, "Ah-ha!" The man showed them the picture he took of them, smirking as he said, "I can make do without the girls around."

Will let him have this one and went upstairs to change, annoyance and contentment warring with each other inside.

The latter won, as it always eventually did. He was more than fine with that.

*

Next day, they visited an indoor pool where Lily and Hannibal absolutely wrecked the rest of them with their superior swimming skills, and took turns beating each other to the finishing

line. It was a tie both graciously accepted, and Hannibal's repressed irritation for not being the only person who was the best at something in the room was quickly replaced by satisfaction when Lily showered him with compliments on his techniques. In the background, Will tried to keep Abigail's giggles down but failed, the sound carrying over the water very easily. Lily blushed and swam to her girlfriend, whereas Hannibal smirked, winked at Will, and went about swimming a few more laps. Beau alternated between taking pictures and looking down at his phone with an inscrutable face.

The day after that was spent at home. Beau resumed his work on the chairs for the backyard dining area, and even borrowed some equipment for the girls to carve into their own chairs. When finished, they would look nothing like each other, but Beau waved away the objections and showed them how to hold each tool and what to do with them. It was wonderful to see them like this, but after some time, more pressing matters made themselves known to Will and Hannibal, and they had to leave for a shopping trip to the motel.

The third day was when Beau disappeared upstairs with none of them the wiser. Hannibal noticed first, and alerted Will to his absence. Will, quickly putting two and two together, made his way up the stairs, a sense of nervous anticipation settling over him. He found Beau's door slightly ajar, and the man himself sitting on his bed, looking down at his hands.

"Dad?" Will asked.

"I talked to her," Beau said, sounding detached. "I… She's. Well." Will listened, hand on the doorknob and body rigid.

"She's coming here, isn't she." It wasn't a question as Will had intended it to be. He had days to prepare for every eventuality, and had also considered what he would do if this particular scenario came to happen.

"Her husband's passed away some years ago. Says she's been living with her son," Beau said, and Will flinched. "Brian. Lives in Pittsburgh."

Will noticed his stillness, and wanting to show his support for Beau, made himself nod, albeit jerkily. "When?" he asked.

"She'll let me know, I guess. Tickets," Beau said in explanation, finally lifting his head. "Will…"

"I understand." Will was quick to assure. "I do. I just… Dad."

"I know, son," Beau heaved a great sigh and slapped his knees getting up. "I'll call right back and tell her not to come if you-"

"No, no." That would be ideal, but it would also be rude, for everyone involved. "No, okay, no. It's fine," Will said, nodding along. "Just tell me when she's arriving, okay?"

"Okay," Beau said. And that was that. That had to be that. With a shaky smile that Will forced on himself, he left his father to it and went downstairs. To his receptive audience he curtly said, "She's coming here," and took his place next to Hannibal.

“You know we can always leave,” Hannibal said, placing his hand on Will’s thigh in support. Will nodded, the action coming to him automatically now, but didn’t say anything. He did not want to be here for this, but hadn’t decided yet what would be the right thing to do. He saw Lily on her armchair, fidgeting, and was overcome momentarily with a sense of regret.

“Oh god, we invited you here and look what you have to deal with,” he groaned. “Lily, god, I’m sorry.”

“Oh, no,” Lily said earnestly. “It’s okay, don’t think about me. You couldn’t have known.” She paused, appeared to consider her words and then with decisiveness, continued. “My dad left us when I was nine. My mother looked after me for years. And then, last year, he came back, out of the blue. He tried another marriage but couldn’t make it work, and wanted us back.” Abigail watched her from her own armchair, her compassionate stare implying she knew about this already. “I just wanted to tell you that it’s fine to feel angry. It’s normal.”

Will swallowed. “What happened then? To your father?”

“He couldn’t understand why we didn’t want him back, and got violent. I… got violent too.” Lily looked uncomfortable, but when she spoke, her voice was steady. “I stopped him. Three shots to his legs. He’s in prison now.”

It was Hannibal who spoke next, reverent. “That’s an admirable thing to do for your family, Lily,” he said. Will looked up at the use of the girl’s given name instead of her last name, and smiled slightly at Hannibal’s profile. It figured that initiation for Hannibal had to be less about the puppies and more about spilling blood.

“Well it’s done,” Lily said, trying to appear nonchalant but more relaxed now that she was not met with their disapproval.

“Are you saying Will should shoot his mother, *ma chérie*?” Abigail teased.

“No!” Lily began, but realized she was being made fun of and glared at her instead. “Ha ha. Very funny.”

“Oh it’s hilarious,” Abigail said with a smirk sent Will’s way. Will ignored her. “Aaaand it’s makeover time for Pops!” She jumped to her feet, energized, and dragged Lily up with her. “Don’t worry, guys, we’ll make her regret ever leaving him.”

“Abby, we should leave the poor man alone,” Lily said, but was enticed by the prospect of making a fun day out of this, and allowed herself to be led upstairs.

Will stared after them. “Should we intervene?” He asked when Beau’s indignant yell drifted down.

“Let them,” Hannibal said. “I think it is a good idea. Presenting well never harmed anyone.”

“You would know,” Will said, playing with the collars of Hannibal’s dark blue shirt. He had compromised that he would not don the vest and the jacket while at home. The ensuing effect was alluring and all too tempting at times, especially with the two buttons undone at the top.

However, right now, Will found himself somewhat unable to use Hannibal's attire as a means to escape the reality. "What do you think I should do?" he asked quietly.

"Do you want to see her?"

"No," Will replied. "I feel like I shouldn't care. But I care enough that I shudder at the thought of seeing her."

"Do you think Beau would mind if you left until she was gone?" Hannibal asked carefully.

"He wouldn't mind it, per se, but I think he would appreciate the support."

"He would have Abigail and Lily here," Hannibal reminded him. "He wouldn't be alone."

"No." Will paused. "I want to be here," he said then, determination hardening his eyes. "She should see that *I* didn't abandon him. That he has *us*."

"That he does," Hannibal said. He knew Will would come to this decision eventually, or he would have made reservations elsewhere already. It was always so fascinating to see the steps he took in deliberation, the exquisite but relatively harmless suffering in his gaze a sight to behold. Hannibal felt no reservations about admitting that he enjoyed seeing any and every emotion pass Will's face, and that pain was one of them. It made him want to hold Will and never let him go, make it so he suffered sweetly until Hannibal put a stop to all of it. It made him feel a heady sense of control and satisfaction to be able to be of use to Will like that. This specific context, however, was not controllable. Hannibal could only go along for the ride and try whatever he could to make sure Will had everything he wanted. If it meant that he would get to meet the ever-elusive mother Will never had, well. It was an added bonus.

"What do you say we left them to it now, and continued exploring your teenage experience ourselves?" Hannibal asked with a big smile. "It is very important to have these experiences, you see. For your mental wellbeing."

Will snorted, not at all the beautifully and silently suffering figure of the canon right now. "I'm not going back to the copse," he said, leaving no room for debate.

"Good thing that was not quite what I had in mind, love," Hannibal said with a chuckle. Will eyed him with suspicion, but was glad for the distraction nonetheless.

*

Hannibal succeeded in turning Will's mood first by taking him to a decent bistro for some much appreciated drinks, and then by purchasing two movie tickets.

"You have got to be kidding me," Will said. Hannibal, wearing the entirety of his suit now that they were out, gave him a side eye that relayed just how serious he was, and led them to their seats in the row farthest back.

Will stood by the head of the row and watched Doctor Hannibal Lecter of Baltimore High Society make his way to his seat, checking the numbers and leaning in to inspect the cleanliness of the seat once he found it. "I cannot believe my eyes," he said.

“What is not to believe? I hear that the cinema is a perfectly acceptable outing for dates,” Hannibal replied, crossing his legs as well as he could in the limited space allowed between the rows, and settled down. He beckoned Will closer.

“Cinema, in a mall, with no popcorn or drinks,” Will said as he threw himself into his seat. He looked at the blank screen for a moment before another thing came to his mind. “And what even is the movie? You didn’t let me choose.”

“I think you will find that none of that matters soon.” To Will’s scowl, Hannibal only grinned.

The salon received only a handful of people, all scattered across the rows ahead of them, before the lights were gone and the ads began. Will had his arm on the armrest between them, and just as the first ad was finished, he felt Hannibal’s hand on his own. He grinned, and leaned towards Hannibal so he could be heard over the loud volume, but found himself drawn into a kiss instead. When Will felt he couldn’t hold back his laugh any longer, he drew back.

“Are you serious?”

“Absolutely,” Hannibal said, and pecked him on the lips again. “It’s all a part of the teenage experience.”

“You *never* did this,” Will said.

“Then you are not alone in your stunted development, are you my love?” With that, he proceeded to swallow Will’s laughter, his kisses purposefully exaggerated with too much tongue to drive in the point. Will prised the hands holding him in place and held Hannibal back with a hand to his chest. He shook his head, delighted at the absurdity of all this.

“We are watching the movie,” he nodded towards the screen, settled back into his seat, and tried to keep a straight face.

“You know, Will, you worry too much.” Hannibal’s lips touched his ear as he spoke, close equal parts to be heard over the noise and to tease Will. “You'd be much more comfortable if you relaxed with yourself.”

“I am too old to be thrown out the theatre or worse, to be apprehended for indecent exposure in public,” Will said, but let Hannibal’s arm settle over his shoulder. It was not quite comfortable with the armrest between them, but neither paid it any mind. Hannibal sighed contently into Will’s hair, and did, in fact, enjoy the movie.

“I am impressed, which I had expected to be,” he said as they left the salon, the end credits rolling. “Although not for the same reasons as I had predicted.”

“There’s something wrong with us,” Will said, chuckling quietly as they made their way through the mall towards their rental. “No self-respecting middle aged men should be this hot for each other. You are the doctor. Tell me what the fuck is wrong with us.”

“We are lucky, darling, in ways those others are not.” Hannibal looked pleased with himself, and Will supposed he should be, considering that he took Will from sullen to laughing so easily. “We have found each other, and made so much for ourselves that we want to live for.” He looked at Will fondly, and opened the door to the passenger side for him. When they were both inside, he said, “It’s nice to see you in such good spirits, Will.”

“I imagine you would feel the same if I took you to the opera to cheer you up,” Will shot back, then added, “and tried to blow you in the bathroom or something.”

“Or something,” Hannibal repeated with a chuckle, and they took off for home.

When they arrived, Lily leaned down the stairs and told them to, “Wait right here,” in uncharacteristic giddiness, before disappearing upstairs again. They didn’t even have enough time to take off their jackets before Beau was escorted into the living room, one girl on each side. Will felt his mouth open while Hannibal bowed slightly.

“Ladies,” he said. “You have outdone yourselves. Please accept my congratulations.”

Beau looked uncomfortable, but still lifted his- freshly shaven- chin up and regarded Will mischievously. “They insisted on shopping. And the haircut. I knew I wasn’t about to win any beauty contests, but I didn’t know I was that ugly!”

“Don’t be silly, Pops,” Abigail said, looking at him critically and fixing one collar of his shirt over his new sweater. “You are a heart-throb!”

Will looked at his father and saw someone else. Gone were the baggy t-shirts and cargo pants with oil splatters, the unkempt hair and beard. Beau Graham looked about ready to walk into any room and *own* it. Will wanted to compliment him, but what came out of his mouth was, “She does not deserve this.”

Beau, surprising both Will and the girls, laughed. “Oh this is not for her.” When Abigail made to protest, Beau cut it with a lifted hand. “No no, he’s right. I let you girls have your fun, but I’m not about to change myself for her. Who cares if she’s impressed or not, I am what I am. But I’ll get these on for when I go to Charlie’s birthday next month. He’s planning a ‘daycation,’ treating the entire wood class to a day in Abita Springs. I’ll look dapper then. Not now.”

“The joke’s on you, dad,” Will said, heartened by what was said. “Shouldn’t have let the beard go if you didn’t want to look dapper.”

“Stop pulling my leg, all of you!” Beau bellowed. “I have eyes, I know how I look. Now I’ll go and change, and when I come back I want no more of this talk!”

Once he was gone, Will caught Abigail’s eye. “You got pictures?”

“Oh, Will, I have *tons*,” she replied, and Will spent the time until dinner picking and choosing which ones would go on his dad’s Facebook page. It was time to have his reckoning with his dad as well for his continuing interest in visual evidence pertaining to his private

life. Will also refused to accept any responsibility for Beau not changing his password after Abigail made the page for him.

*

The next day, during another engraving session for Beau and the girls, with Will tinkering with the broken radio in one corner of the yard and Hannibal sitting in the folding lawn chair a few feet away from him, reading one of Beau's old books under the shade of the lone tree there, they received another call. Will looked up at his dad, who did not go inside the house to talk privately, and heard half the conversation.

"Hello… I'm alright. You?... Did you? Well, that's alright…. Yeah, I guess… No, it's fine... Bye."

"Dad?"

Beau put his phone on the table and sat back down to carve away. "Madeleine will arrive tomorrow afternoon. She called to confirm so she could buy the ticket."

"Okay," Will said. It seemed like there wasn't much he could say at this point. He bowed over the radio and continued to fiddle with it.

He and Hannibal had discussed what they would do when she came. They would be there for when she arrived, and then they would take their leave so Beau and she could have their talk without concerns for their privacy. It was an unpleasant ordeal in which Will could not place himself anywhere easily. A familiar sense of numbness and detachment, something he often felt before he was taken to a crime scene, was making itself known once again. He remembered those days, and how Hannibal had been his shelter, someone safe who Will could take refuge in whenever the need arose.

A look up found Hannibal's eyes already on him, and Will thought to himself that, no matter what happened in between, Hannibal was once again his safe haven. He smiled. "Any plans for tomorrow?" he asked, knowing they would take the girls along unless they wanted to spend the day by themselves.

"None at all," Hannibal replied, his thumb caressing the page he was on, but his attention entirely on Will. "I was thinking we could explore the city. See the places of your youth."

"I was a cop here," Will said. "Want me to take you to the precinct? Or a memorable crime scene, perhaps?"

"Would that we could find a fresh one," Hannibal said, lowering his voice so as not to be heard by Lily, who was the only one left oblivious to the kind of people they were. "I do so love to see your beautiful mind at work."

"We can always call Jack if you want a show," Will smirked. "Would you like that? A return to the capital city of serial killers, all the worst the humanity has to offer lining up for our attention?"

“I read the other day that they found a young woman sewn into the womb of a horse,” Hannibal said as though he was sharing a joke with Will. “With a live bird inside the woman’s chest.”

“I take it that Freddie managed to get the site running, then,” Will said. The memory of the crashed *TattleCrime* page was still making him snicker whenever he remembered.

“She has yet to post anything that is not recent, and she has a new domain name now,” Hannibal said, his lips twisting at the corners and making him look sinister. “*RealTattleCrimeJournalism*,” he added, and Will guffawed.

“She’s just asking for it at this point,” he replied in between amused huffs. “Does she mention me at all?” At Hannibal’s slight headshake, Will went back to his project, turning it on and off to see if he fixed the problem. He hadn’t. “Ours was a fleeting affair, I guess. But what about Jack? I’m surprised that he hasn’t called me yet. I mean, a bird in a woman in a horse? Sounds like something right up my alley.”

Hannibal didn’t reply, and when Will checked, he had his head tilted to the side, the exact posture Will knew would result in a confession if pressed. He pressed.

“Hannibal? What did you tell Jack?”

Hannibal licked his lips and held back for a moment. Will had a feeling the man was waiting for a mean look from Will in moments like these, and he obeyed by narrowing his eyes. That got him talking.

“I had already been cultivating a sense of… guilt, in him, concerning his treatment towards you.”

“While at the same time you’d been trying to alienate me from him. Yeah, I know.” Will reached with his bare foot to nudge Hannibal’s, and received a nudge back. “Were you as successful with him as you were with me?”

“Marginally more so, I would say,” Hannibal said, the memory of Jack’s face when his cordial psychiatrist friend gave him a thorough dressing down inciting a pleasant warmth in him. “After you left, he started to pester me into calling you and convincing you to come back. He said you refused him each time he tried. I might have taken my frustrations out on him then. I think he now believes you to be way more fragile than he had previously assumed, and he feels abject remorse.”

“Huh,” Will took off the back casing of the radio once again when his last modifications didn’t yield results either. “And here I was, thinking he was finally tired of being rejected all the time.”

“Agent Crawford does not concern himself with such small matters as consent. The way to stop him always was making him doubt himself. ‘When strong, avoid them. If of high morale, depress them. Seem humble to fill them with conceit. If at ease, exhaust them. If united, separate them. Attack their weaknesses. Emerge to their surprise.’*”

Moments like these reminded Will of the monster he was sharing his life with now, and how much he loved it as he loved the man. “I’m so glad you’re on my side, now,” he teased.

“We are on a side of our own, *mylimasis*. It’s us against the world,” Hannibal murmured. He looked so proud of that, and Will was no longer surprised to find that he felt the same way. They shared a wicked grin before Will went back to the radio and Hannibal to his book, content to leave the rest unsaid, but now unknown. *Let them tremble.*

*

True to his words, Beau did not put on his new clothes. Barring the tidy haircut and smooth face, he was as Will always knew him: Comfortable, down to earth, hiding what nerves he had with gruffness. The breakfast was a relatively quiet affair with the newly fixed radio playing country music in the background.

Once everyone was ready to start their days, Will made them coffee. It was Turkish coffee that Abigail and Lily had been introduced to by their friend Can, and that Will had been introduced to by, surprise surprise, Hannibal. Upon discovering their shared love for the thing, Will had made sure to get some at their latest *actual* shopping trip so that Beau could try it too. They used the smallest teacups in the house to serve them, and enjoyed Beau’s expressions upon drinking it with relish in the backyard table. Tentative first sip, grimace, wary second sip, raised brows at the taste growing on him, curious third sip, and then he was hooked. The girls were glad to make him the second cup when he asked for it, happy to do something to alleviate the anxious current that they all ignored through the morning.

When the doorbell rang, Hannibal surprised all of them by being the one to go for the door, not an ounce of hesitation in his gait. He cut an intimidating figure in his dark suit with its crimson plaid pattern, stark white shirt, and flowery tie with red accents. He opened the door with all the flourish that could be expected from someone who thought dressing like that in a modest New Orleans neighbourhood was perfectly acceptable.

They all followed him to the living room, but while all eyes were on Hannibal’s retreating back, Will’s attention was stolen by Lily, who positioned herself slightly and subtly in front of Abigail, her arms crossed. It was that and Hannibal playing the unlikely host that warmed his heart and calmed his nerves enough that he found the strength to face the door.

“You must be Mrs. Williams,” Hannibal said. Will took note of the change in his manners with awe. Gone was the relaxed, carefree and playful man Will had come to know lately. Before them was the poised, unaffected, stolid Hannibal Lecter, who may as well have been welcoming a new patient into his office. Will loved him so much at that moment that it took conscious effort to focus on their guest. He approached the door, and looked over Hannibal’s shoulder.

“Yes,” *Mrs. Williams* said, hesitant as though she was caught off guard. It ended when she looked from Hannibal to Will, recognition lighting her eyes. “And you must be William,” she said, an apprehensive smile twisting her lips. Despite the white curls cascading over her shoulders, streaked with the occasional gray strands, and her face, lined with more wrinkles than one would expect from someone her age, she stood tall. Will found himself nodding and taking in the rest of her appearance; a smart pantsuit, tasteful jewellery, a shawl over her

shoulders Will now could tell was silken and probably costly. If he had chanced upon her at the street, he would not have any inkling that this woman, obviously of a higher socio-economic status than him, could be his mother.

If not for the eyes. Those were his eyes looking back at him, the exact shape and colour. Basically a replica, down to the length of the lashes and the density of the brows.

“Stop crowding her,” came the curt command from the living room. Will unthinkingly obeyed, and stepped aside, a hand on Hannibal’s arm urging him to do the same. “Madeleine, come in.”

She did, with timid steps of her low-heeled shoes. She tore her eyes from Will’s, and found Beau’s. And then Will witnessed something else that made him halt.

Eyes brightening with tears but none spilling yet, she looked at Beau and held out both hands for him to take, her oversized purse hanging from one elbow. Beau, abandoning his post by the armchair farthest from the door, went to take her hands in both his. They looked at each other, weighing each other’s expressions with wide eyes, and went for a hug at the same time.

Abigail sniffled somewhere to Will’s right, and he vaguely registered Hannibal’s hand on his waist. He was not at all sure what he should be doing. This was not what he woke up expecting to witness today, and he felt awkward standing with his mouth open and brows furrowed. He was rescued from the absurdity of seeing his parents together, sharing the same space, for the first time in his life, by Lily.

“I guess we don’t need that gun after all,” she whispered to him, and when he turned his attention to her, she nodded towards the kitchen. “Come on,” she said. Will felt Hannibal squeeze his waist and release him, but kept his focus on Lily as they made their way to the kitchen, especially avoiding looking at Beau and *Mrs. Williams* when they were startled out of their embrace by the movement.

“Let’s get them more of that coffee, what do you say?” Lily said, now used to the kitchen layout well enough that she was moving fluidly in it, taking the pot and the jar and turning on the stove. Will sank into a chair and watched her with unseeing eyes for the most part. “You can spit in her drink, if you want?” Lily offered and thus managed to bring Will back to earth. This was coming from the goody-two-shoes they had come to love. He snorted.

“That would be so rude,” he said.

“What would be so rude? I have no idea what you are talking about,” Lily replied, giving her acting training its due with that innocent, angelic face. Will laughed, startling himself.

“I can see why Abby likes you,” he said, taking care to use the moniker around Lily. His eyes traced her moves as she cooked the coffee, stirring the contents of the pot with a spoon, the rhythmic sound of it calming in the cosy kitchen.

“Yeah, I can see it to,” she said with a damn right devilish smirk, which Will returned. From the living room the sounds of hushed conversation was drifting towards them, with

Hannibal's level voice asking a question or answering one from time to time.

For the first time since this whole thing with his mother started, Will thought things would be alright.

"You good?" Lily asked, extending one of the cups in his direction, one brow raised conspiratorially.

"Yeah, I'm good," Will huffed. He let her carry both cups, his and hers, and took a moment to collect himself before entering the room.

It was a tight fit. Beau had given her a place on the armchair, while he sat close to her on the couch. Hannibal was on the other armchair, with Abigail and now Lily sitting between him and Beau on the couch. Will, already predisposed to aimless wanderings, opted to lean against the bookcase by Hannibal's side, and from his vantage point, could see all of them clearly.

There was an awkward pause when he came in, and after Abigail finished explaining what she was studying and where, there was silence.

"Don't stop on my account," Will said, desperately wanting to cover his face but resisting the urge by crossing his arms. He had an inkling that he looked defensive, which he was, and so he embraced it, feeling entitled to it to a degree.

Fixing her blue eyes on Will's, Mrs. Williams started. "I know this is… not ideal." *This is your mother,* reminded a voiced inside Will's head, *who abandoned you and your father, and saw fit to pay a visit after almost half a century*. "And I know that nothing I say can fix anything. I don't want you to think that that's what I expect, William."

"Why are you here, then?" Will snapped at her. The carefully chosen words were grating on his nerves. At least she had the decency to look abashed, which consequently made him feel both good- because, yeah- and bad at the same time, for yelling at an elderly woman. Thankfully no one told him off for it.

"I made many mistakes," she said. "One after the other. Some, I was able to rectify. Most, I learned to live with. But this… Leaving you. I could not forgive myself for it, even for a moment, for all these years."

"Oh, it's all okay then," Will said. Hannibal turned to look at him, all to easily recognizing Will's sarcasm as the defence mechanism it was. It served as a reality check. "Look," he began again. "I'm sure you had your reasons, but frankly, I never knew you. I don't want your explanations." Beau bent his head to the side, looking at him with heavy eyes. "I didn't raise a child as a single parent for years while working with no help and no explanations as to why." He straightened then, letting his arms hand on his sides. "If you want to forgive yourself, it's not me you should be addressing," he added, and turned to Hannibal. "Are you ready?"

"Yes," Hannibal said, radiating a quiet sense of pride and calmness. "Ladies?"

“Right,” Abigail said. They all got up, and went for their purses and coats.

Hannibal inclined his head first towards Beau, then towards the woman looking at them with very familiar perceptive eyes. “I’m afraid we already had plans for a family outing,” he said pleasantly. “I hope you forgive us our departure, Mr. Graham. Mrs. Williams.”

“Of course,” she replied while Beau nodded. Will was the first out the door and Abigail the last, lingering back to meet Beau’s eyes, to smile reassuringly at him, and for good measure, to give him a wink.

And then they were gone.

*

Despite only joking about it the other day, they did in fact end up going to places Will remembered from his time as a cop in the city. Will found himself driving them in one of their rentals to the public garden where he had faced his very first crime scene, fresh out of the academy. He had scared himself as well as his co-workers by first trying to act out the murder on a nearby tree and then by puking his guts out when he was inevitably stopped, torn from his mind abruptly when his partner trampled him to the ground.

“It was a mess,” he murmured, and glared at what he suspected was the same tree from where he was sitting inside the cafe there. “I was put on compassionate leave faster than I could say ‘empathy disorder,’” he added. “They wouldn’t let me back before the time was up. Had to sneak around and pull some strings to get them to catch the guy.”

“That sounds so… Wild,” Lily said, because she had her manners and would not tell her girlfriend’s ‘uncle’ that he actually sounded crazy. Will gave her a bitter smile.

“Will is uniquely equipped to assume the perspectives of anyone,” Hannibal chimed in, not known to miss a chance to show him off. “His forensic analysis is based on evidence, which is then elevated to what I believe to be the level of art,” he added, smirking knowingly when Will stared down at his cup of tea with bashful determination.

“What an artist I am,” Will murmured. “I can understand the likes of the Chesapeake Ripper,” he gave Hannibal the side eye and caught the smirk, “but I’m an asshole to a sixty-something woman.”

“The woman who left you,” Lily said, while Abigail quietly added, “Your mother.” Will looked up at her, intrigued by her unusually sullen voice. “She’s your mother, Will. It’s just… I just think that should mean something.”

Will had the sudden flashback to Abigail’s mother gurgling blood on the floor, her already vacant eyes staring up at him without seeing him. The memory was jarring. He looked at his interactions with his mother through Abigail’s eyes, and saw how ungrateful he might appear to her. No matter how well she was faring nowadays, she would no doubt jump at the chance to see her mother again.

Will nodded solemnly, relaying to her that he understood. Lily must have put the abrupt heaviness down to the day's events, believing Abigail's parents to be entirely alive and unproblematic as of yet. Abigail had told her that her parents were on a cruise vacation of all things, to explain why they were not visiting them while in the States. Will and Hannibal had contingency plans for when that particular confessional heart-to-heart took place between them. For now, though, nobody commented on it.

"If I may impart an observation," Hannibal said, smoothly drawing the attention to himself, "I believe Mrs. Williams had been prepared for a far harsher reception. She had seemed quite more at ease towards the end than when she arrived."

"I'll behave," Will said in response to that, "once I know how dad feels about this whole thing. Until then, though, I think I'll reserve the right to be a bit-"

"Prickly." Abigail completed his sentence seamlessly. "That's fine, I guess, but be prepared to soften up soon. That hug did not look like it would lead to a fight. They looked so cute!"

"It did have a certain charm to it," Hannibal said. Will knew Hannibal had no affinity for public displays of affection not of his own, and was saying this to get a rise out of him. Will complied by grimacing in his direction, but letting himself relax and share a smile at their established dynamic.

"If you guys don't mind the change in topics," Lily began, and at her hesitant voice, Abigail immediately reached for her hand. "I'd like to return to the topic of murder. I know, morbid, but I'm curious. What do you guys think about 'le Harbinger de l'île'?" She was careful to keep quiet, even though they had an ocean between them and "the Harbinger of the Island" as far as she was concerned. She couldn't know she was sharing a pleasant lunch with him, or in this case, *them*, after all.

To their credit, none of the three killers making up the Harbinger had trouble feigning ignorance. "The religious zealot? An interesting choice," Hannibal said, face straight and entirely calm.

"He hunts so close to us," Lily said, her wide, worried eyes on Will. "I just wondered if you might, I don't know, have some insight? Something to avoid… *that*?"

"He is delusional," he dutifully began. "The religious imagery is heavy in his displays, which indicates that he believes he's doing the work of God when he kills. He sees an affront to God when he looks at his victims," Will said, and tilted his head as if in thought. "That does not mean the victims are necessarily ungodly, or blasphemous. It's just how he perceives them."

"A deeply troubled individual, without doubt," Hannibal added with a heavy sigh. "I believe he would display his beliefs in his everyday life. It might do well to avoid those who give voice to their passionate views of religion, in any case."

"I'm more concerned about his followers," Abigail said, her sentiment genuine. "They've become something like a cult at the moment."

She was right. The Harbinger, haunting Île-de-France and setting up religious scenes in fine detail, was gaining a cult following now. The police were astounded by the lack of evidence to the point that the media portrayed them- *him* as an occult figure, his displays so pristine as though they drop from the sky. Doomsday believers and religious nutjobs were taking each display as godly signs of an impending apocalypse, and were growing more and more frenzied whenever the Harbinger hunted.

They had chosen to change their MO upon making a home for themselves in Paris, believing that there was no way the Ripper's cynical approach to religion and god would be likened to that of an apparent zealot. Hiding their kills under such a guise was, more than anything, practical. Hannibal was vastly amused by being viewed as a divine being by the masses; it played well into his superiority- *ahem*, *God*- complex. Will appreciated being able to embrace his inner self and creativity without leaving any evidence or clue that could point towards them. Abigail just liked to hunt. But the increase in the number of the end-of-days fear mongers and the heightened unease in the general populace was a matter of concern; it drew media attention like crazy, and none of them would want Jack to get a wind of this. They had to talk about that, and soon.

"I can't tell more without seeing the crime scenes," Will said, playing his part down to the t. "But I have to agree that the followers pose a bigger danger than the man himself."

Lily nodded and let Abigail wrap an arm around her waist as much as their positions around the table allowed. She was the least likely person to fall victim to the Harbinger, and it was frustrating to not be able to comfort her as such.

"This type of killer is known to escalate, become sloppy," Hannibal said, drawing a slight smile from Will at the obvious attempt to console the young woman. "I'm sure they will catch him soon."

"Let's just all us be very careful," Lily said, sending Abigail a warning look. She returned it with a small smile and a nod.

The reminder of their lives in Paris worked wonders to put things into a perspective for Will. He would be level-headed, make sure Beau was content, and carry on, because Hannibal was right as usual: They *were* lucky. They *had* found each other, and they had acquired so much for themselves that it gave them not only the will to live, but also to do so with *passion*.

Will silently wished the same for his dad, and changed the topic to the time in his first year as a cop when he had been mistaken for a drug dealer during a recon mission and had the cops called on him, rendering the entire thing useless.

Laughter, after all, never hurt anyone.

*

They came to an empty house, and Will told the others to dig out their spare key from under the rocks at the side of the house while he called Beau. He looked at the space where his old car, now his dad's car, was usually parked, listened to the dial and berated himself for being so *stupid to leave dad alone with-*

“William, hello, it’s-”

“Where’s dad?” Will said between gritted teeth.

“He’s right her-”

“Put it on speaker.” He sounded slightly unhinged, and he knew many men and women whose last act in life was to wet themselves because of this exact voice. To her credit, Mrs. Williams kept her cool and did as she was told.

“Dad?”

“’m behind the wheel, sonny,” came his father’s cheerful voice. Will sagged where he stood, supporting himself with a hand to his knee. “What happened?”

“Nothing,” he said, breathing through his nose. “We came back and you weren’t home…”

“Yeah, I’m dropping Madeleine off at her hotel. Hold your horses, why don’t ya? You keep that fella of yours on a leash. I’ll be back in an hour or so.”

“Dad? Dad, do you know how to turn on the GPS?” Will pressed, still feeling his heart beat in his throat.

“Gotta go, boy! See you soon,” Beau said. Then Madeleine spoke again.

“I know how to turn it on,” she said, sounding very calm and attentive. “I’ll do it now.”

“Fine,” Will said, and because he was his father’s son, added, “Thank you. Good night,” before hanging up. It was while he was standing there, rubbing at his eyes furiously that Hannibal called to him from the open front door.

“I’m drawing you a bath upstairs, and bringing up what’s left of the *creme de menthe,*” he said, his amusement audible. He then added, more quietly, “I’m also joining you, so don’t take too long.” Will nodded without turning to him, and lingered there under the light of the setting sun until his heartbeat returned to normal.

He then proceeded to get it beating fast again. He left the girls in the kitchen downstairs putting something together for dinner, shut the bathroom door behind himself, and hurriedly took off his clothes, throwing them on the tiled floor. “I want you inside me. Now,” he said right before grabbing Hannibal by the collar and pushing him against the door. He did not allow Hannibal to say anything, and after a punishing kiss that muffled the attempts, went down to his knees.

“Will-” Hannibal breathed, his pants pushed down to his ankles before he could finish.

“Shut up and fuck my mouth,” Will said. The adrenaline spikes of the day had finally gotten to him, and he was so ready to escape, however fleetingly, the weight of it all. He wasted no time taking all of Hannibal’s cock into his mouth. It filled up on his tongue and under his furious ministrations, and soon he had to disregard the ache in his throat and push forward with single-minded determination.

Hannibal was gasping at the sight of Will naked on his knees, at the contrast it made to his half-clothed self, at the gagging sounds he was making around his cock, and at the way he seemed fully intent to get what he wanted from Hannibal with though for little else. This was not a side to Will he was accustomed to, the desperation and consuming hunger was an occurrence that Hannibal got to enjoy rarely. However, he knew enough to see that Will did not need him passive and accommodating right now. Contrary to his apparent desire for something hard and fast and brutal, what he needed was to let go of himself and have Hannibal take care of him. Hannibal found himself capable of giving him both, and all too eager to please.

He got a fistful of Will's hair with one hand, holding it tight enough to hurt. The fingers of his other hand found Will's nose, and *squeezed*.

Will's throat opened up further. Tears gathered in the corners of his eyes and spilled. He looked up at Hannibal through wet eyelashes, blue eyes shining bright as the whites reddened. A choke, and another, and another before Hannibal released his nose, and Will withdrew, gulping heaving breaths, his chin dripping saliva. He dove right back in, trusting Hannibal to set the pace as he placed his hands on Hannibal's thighs, feeling the muscles contracting and the hair coarse as his breathing was restricted once more.

This time, he coughed when Hannibal released him, squeezing the thighs, nails digging into the flesh, and looking up at him. With his red eyes, running nose, his face covered in spit and tears, he was the most magnificent creature Hannibal had ever laid his eyes on. So he said, "Once more," and pulled Will back by the hair, and closed his fingers on the nose, fighting against the pleasure to keep his eyes open. He was in to the hilt, muscles squeezing around him, the hot wet cavern of Will's mouth almost enough for him to finish right then and there. He could so easily come down his throat, make him take it all, and lick the drops that escaped himself, pushing it back into Will with a filthy kiss. Will would let him, and he would love every second of it, so really, he could. But regardless of how tempting it was, Hannibal managed to summon the last bit of his infamous self-control, and pulled Will away.

"Very good," he said. Will wanted to wipe his face, but just as the thought crossed his mind, both his hands were seized in a hard grip. He was pulled up and slammed against the door. He allowed Hannibal to position him as he wanted, confident that he would give them both what they needed, and revelling in the sense of being handled so thoroughly.

Hannibal grabbed his hips and pulled them close to himself, while pushing Will's chest against the door, making Will's spine arch. He then quickly got rid of his clothes, and nudged Will's feet as far apart as he could comfortably stand. His last act was bringing Will's arms to rest on his waist, holding both forearms together with one hand and pressing down.

With the other, he held himself, and began to push in.

It was not like them to forego preparation. And if it weren't for Will, whispering "*Yes yes yes-"* against the door, Hannibal would not deny either of them the pleasure. This, however, was an altogether gripping experience on its own. He pushed through the resistance slowly but without stopping, responding each time Will winced by a squeeze on his arms and a soft shush. Will was tight and hot, only his own saliva easing the way, the feeling of his body around Hannibal exquisite and on the verge of painful for both of them, but he carried on,

rewarding Will with a kiss to his shoulder when he pushed back. Both breathed sighs of relief when Hannibal was fully buried inside Will, making use of the moment to collect themselves.

When Hannibal moved again, it was very, *very* slowly. He thrust out until only the head was inside, and pushed back in, watching raptly as he disappeared into Will and as the rim clung to him on the way out as though to draw him back. Hannibal had to bite his lip hard to keep this going. He reached for Will's hair again, bent his head to the side and leaned in to whisper into his ear.

"Is this what you wanted, Will?" He used the name as a way to influence, to remind Will who was in charge, and also because he loved to say it, sigh it, moan it.

"Faster," Will breathed, his tortured voice like music to Hannibal's ears.

"I would have gone faster if I wanted, which I don't," Hannibal said with that cruel emotionless timbre he used with their victims, driving in the point with another leisurely thrust. "And there isn't much you can do about it, Will, is there?"

Will gave a guttural moan at that. This, more than the fast pace, more than the quick release, was what he needed. He let himself drift, eyes closed and lost in the sensations only Hannibal had ever been able to make him feel.

"I can do whatever I want with you," Hannibal's husky voice in his ear, the man himself making a place for himself in Will with measured movements, his pulse beating inside him, his heat scorching wherever they touched, and Will was completely content at last. "And you would let me, wouldn't you, Will?" He could only nod as much as the hand in his hair allowed, which was just enough to get his point across. "I'm glad we are clear on that," Hannibal said, and let go of his hair to reach around for Will's cock. Instead of stroking him, he cupped it against Will's abdomen, and increased the force behind his thrusts. "You would beg me for it," Hannibal said, not even bothering to make it into a question because yes, Will would, he would beg.

"Please," he said hoarsely, not even knowing what it was that he was begging for other than for Hannibal to do with him as he pleased.

"Again," Hannibal said, the command emphasized with a press against his cock.

On a quiet moan, Will repeated, "Please." Will getting quieter meant Will getting deeper into the haze of pleasure, and closer to his orgasm, and Hannibal felt his own breath catch in his throat at the realization that he could let go soon, very soon. He started to go faster, his hold on Will's arms bruising as he used it to slam into his lover.

"Again," he gasped into Will's ear, wanting to hear that scratchy voice as Will lost himself to their dance.

"Please, Hannibal, please," Will said, and Hannibal threw his control to the wind. It was overrated, anyway, when he could give Will what he needed instead. He kept his palm flat but hard on Will's cock, and let the reverberations of their movements provide all the touch Will would get. He was pounding into Will now, pushing his body against the door, making

contact with his trembling thighs on every thrust forward. Sweat was trailing down Will's neck, back and legs. Hannibal felt his own drip from his hair as he watched the side of Will's face. With his eyes closed, mouth open, lips puffy and abused, he was the devout saint and the debauched sinner all at once, suffering so beautifully for love and loving all the suffering he was given.

"Come for me, Will," Hannibal said, determined to see Will satisfied first. He pushed his palm against Will harder, trapping his cock against his belly, and was once again amazed that Will could find so much pleasure in their coupling that he needed little stimulation after some point. He felt Will pulse in his palm, and kept the pressure constant, no more or less as he shortened the movement of his hips, now shallow and quick and deep, chasing his own release. He brought up his hand, coated in Will's come, and closed it over Will's open mouth. The feeling of Will's tongue on his palm, tasting himself, was what pushed him over the edge. He stilled inside Will, throbbing within, and finally, let his eyes close.

He could only allow himself a few seconds to linger before he let go of Will's arms and rubbed them to get the blood flowing again. He gently took Will's hands, wrapping the arms around Will's chest with his own covering them, taking his lover's weight off the door and onto himself as he helped him stand straighter, yet unwilling to withdraw from Will.

Will let his head fall back on Hannibal's shoulder and kissed the underside of his chin. "Love you," he whispered there, more moving lips than sound, but he knew Hannibal understood anyway. His answer was tilting his head and catching Will's lips with his, this close mouthed kiss just as intimate as what they had just shared.

Hannibal supported Will, who walked on legs shaky from the strain they both put them through, and led him to the bathtub. Helping him sit gingerly on the rim, Hannibal checked the water and found it significantly cooled down. With a sigh, he drained some of it and turned on the hot water faucet. As they waited, he kneeled on the floor before Will, and began to rub at his calves. He looked up at Will, with his reverence and devotion clear in his eyes.

Will met the gaze. It made him want to smile, but upon finding his face uncooperative, he lifted both hands to cup Hannibal's face, his thumbs tracing the thin lips idly.

"Thank you," he said, sounding more like himself if still a bit hoarse. He cleared his throat but it made little improvement, made apparent when he continued, "You always know just what I need."

"You tell me loud and clear, my love," Hannibal said, rubbing his cheeks against the hands. "And you trust me to take care of you. It's a humbling experience, for which I am eternally grateful."

"As if," Will huffed, his smirk translating through his voice if not through his expression. "Humbled and grateful, huh?"

"Stranger things have happened," Hannibal said, smiling for the both of them, and smoothly rose to turn off the water. Checking it again, he deemed it warm enough for Will and got in, helping Will settle against him, back against chest, enveloped in the pleasant heat of both the water and Hannibal's arms.

Abandoning the glasses, they took turns drinking the mint liqueur straight from its bottle and stayed there until they heard the front door open and close downstairs, heralding Beau's return. Then, they stayed just a little bit longer.

*

It was later than usual when they all sat around the dinner table in the porch, and it was windier too, making the night feel colder than it was. Lily and Abigail got up as soon as they finished eating, and promised to show up early in the morning. Hannibal, too, collected the dishes and made the excuse to wash them to leave Will and Beau alone, but only after he brought out blankets for them to wrap around themselves. He tugged Will's up to his nape, telling him he just had a bath, and went inside.

"You've got a good thing going, don't you, Will?" Beau asked. He was always disarmed when he saw the little, thoughtful gestures between them.

"I can't complain," Will said, hugging his cover tighter. "You have the pack?" he asked, and nodded his thanks when Beau offered it to him. It was reminiscent of the last time Will visited and they sat smoking in this very backyard, but that was where the similarities stopped. Will was in a relationship and had a family of his own, whereas Beau was a man with new interests and a firmer grip on life now. Will liked it, and wanted to offer all he could to make sure neither of them ever became the sad bastards of their pasts again. He lit his cigarette, and spoke on the exhale, "So."

"So," was the reply.

"Did she give you the answers you wanted?"

"She did," Beau said, making to stroke his beard. It was a force of habit, and when his hands only found his clean cheek, he huffed.

"Did they satisfy you?" Will asked. He felt calm, calmer than he thought he'd be for this chat, and it was a small blessing.

"It depends," Beau said. He met Will's eyes. "On whether or not they satisfy you."

"No it doesn't." It didn't, really, not when Beau let Will live with little thought spared to his own concerns and wishes for Will. So it didn't matter, when Will was going to do the same, and treat his father like the wise old man that he was. "If you find her explanations acceptable, then that's all I care about. If you forgive her, so will I."

"Doesn't work that way, son," Beau huffed. "I can't forgive her on your behalf."

"No, you'll forgive her for yourself, and I'll forgive her because she gave you closure." Will felt that what he was saying was right as the words left his mouth. This was right. "I will not stop you from making your own decisions and living your life."

Beau gazed at him for a long moment, and Will kept the eye contact without difficulty, letting him find whatever he was searching for. "I see your mouth flapping again," Beau repeated his

words from days ago with a slight twist to his lips. “But this time, I don’t know whose words I’m hearing.”

“They are yours,” Will said, a shaky smile tightening his lips. “These are all you’ve ever said to me, dad.”

Beau bent his head down, no doubt to hide the fact that he was tearing up, because Will was doing the same for that exact reason, Abigail’s fond *softies* ringing in his mind. They smoked the rest of their cigarettes in silence.

“Her parents,” Beau began, well after they put the stubs out. “They were from old money. Wanted her to marry well. She found out she was pregnant with you right before they arranged for her engagement to some guy, much older, that she didn’t know. They told everyone that she participated in an exchange programme, that she went abroad for her studies. They kept her hidden until she gave birth to you.”

“Jesus,” Will breathed out silently. It was nothing he had not imagined could have happened, but hearing Beau tell it, voice quivering, was nothing like his distant elaborations.

“They wanted to give you up for adoption, all underhanded of course. But she managed to bring you to me. Gave you her name, even. Well, last name, but it was all she could do.” Beau was shaking his head minutely now, and Will thought he was unaware of doing so. “Wish I could say I could’ve helped her if I knew. Maybe I could’ve, I don’t know,” he said. “But she loved her parents, felt shame for putting them in a bad position, couldn’t say no. I wanna say she should have resisted, should have said to hell with you all and came to me, but. But when you live as long as I have…”

“You can’t,” Will finished the thought. “I understand, dad.”

Another minute was spent in silent consideration of what happened to Madeleine Williams. Will found that learning at last the reasons behind his abandonment by his mother, while upsetting in its own right, did little to heal him. He had still spent his childhood with a heartbroken man who struggled to make ends meet and to raise a child with a rare form of empathy disorder into a self-sufficient adult. He had still woken up crying from his nightmares wanting the arms of a mother around him, had still borne the brunt of kids making fun of him for not having a mom, had still thought he would have been normal had his mother not abandoned him or, at his darkest moments, thought he was abandoned *because* he wasn’t normal. Like a tree trunk growing around a forgotten bike in the forest, he had grown around these, and incorporated them into who he was. He could understand her, he could empathize with her, he could find her guilty or innocent, but it was not going to make much difference in the end.

What could make a difference was if he let things happen without resentment. If he let his father do what he wanted. If he supported him in his decisions. If he behaved like half the man Beau Graham was.

“I’m not saying I will let her in with open arms,” he said eventually. “If she wants to be a part of your life now, I will learn to deal with that too. But whatever happens, I’ll always be on your corner, dad.”

Beau nodded, a hearty gesture implying he didn't trust himself to speak. But when a thought occurred to him, he laughed.

"You know," he said, his entire face alight with mirth. "She never said she wanted to be together or something."

"She'd be mad to not want you." The chance to lighten the mood was one too good to pass. "Have you seen yourself? You're a catch, dad. A heart-throb, Abby said."

Beau lightly kicked Will in the shin. "I didn't raise no sycophant!"

"That's right, 'cause I'm telling the truth," Will said and laughed when Beau grimaced in distaste. "Would you want her if she wanted to try, dad?"

Beau gave the question the reflection it deserved, and said, "I've already lost the chance to grow old with her, Will. I'd like to have the chance to at least grow *older* together."

"Then you will," Will replied with an air of finality. They enjoyed each other's company in silence for a while longer, and only went inside when Hannibal lightly knocked on the screen door to remind them of the cold. Beau and Will went upstairs to their rooms, and Hannibal made his bed in the living room couch.

That night, Will slept the sleep of a man finally at peace with himself.

And that was that.

*

Hannibal woke up in the dead of night to the sound of footsteps. At first he thought it could be Will, but the cadence was wrong, and which left either Beau or an intruder. He got up, quiet as a cat, grabbed the closest weapon he could find -a carving knife Beau had left on the cabinet by the living room door- and made his way towards the source.

Which turned out to be Beau. When Hannibal turned on the light to the kitchen, the man froze momentarily with one hand on the handle of the high cupboard and the other holding a whiskey bottle by the neck. They regarded each other, and when Beau's eyes stalled on the knife in Hannibal's hand, he snorted.

"Were you gonna kill me with my own knife, boy?" He asked, shutting the cabinet door and moving to twist the bottle open.

Hannibal put the thing down on the small table there. "I thought it could be an intruder," he explained matter-of-factly, earning himself another snort.

"You know," Beau mused out loud, bringing down two cups instead of one and gesturing for Hannibal to take a seat. "I keep trying and failing to decide whether Will's safe with you or not."

"I assure you, there's no place safer for him," Hannibal said, more truthful than arrogant. He took the offered seat across Beau, and accepted the drink that was pushed towards him with a

nod. “And, of course, he is perfectly capable of protecting himself.”

“Of course,” Beau repeated. “You know, attempted murder aside, it’s nice that you’re here now. I’ve been meaning to talk to you.”

“Oh,” Hannibal said. It was not his most eloquent moment, but in his defence, he had just been ready to spill blood and he also never had the man show interest in him specifically. To compensate, he followed it with, “I would be glad to be of assistance, if it is at all possible.”

“We’ll see.” Beau then got up to get ice from the fridge, loosening a few cubes over his cup and offering to do the same for Hannibal, who accepted it. “Hear me out, now. My kid,” he sat back down, “was quiet. Sulky. Kept to himself. People thought he was weird, called him names and all that shit. With that empathy of his, it was not easy for him. He grew up, went to the academy, and when he started working as a cop, he left the house. Visited me once a month when he was here, once a year if he could manage when he moved to Virginia. In all that time, he was still withdrawn. We spent what little time we could together in silence.” Beau sighed. “He still struggled. I could see it, but he never told me. He got shot, and I had to hear it from the hospital, you know? Much as I loved him, he was a mystery to me.”

Hannibal took in all this, rapt. It was worthy of regret that he could never turn back the time and know Will as he was a child, a teenager, a young adult. This was the next best thing. He was wholly invested, and nodded for Beau to continue.

“This past week,” Beau paused to take a large gulp and hissed when the spirit burned his throat. “I finally got to meet my son. I had glimpses thanks to that little wench with all her spying and whatnot, but it can’t be compared to what I’m seeing now. He’s wised up, smiling, making jokes, showing affection, telling his mind. Sassing me around,” Beau added, and smiled at Hannibal. “I can tell what he feels when he feels it. I’ve never seen him like this. He’s so... “

“Alive?” Hannibal suggested, remembering Will’s words back at the copse when he tried to describe his father with the newfound love for life.

“Yes!” Beau exclaimed, waving his cup in the air before deciding that it wasn’t worth the risk to spill it, and drinking it instead. “Alive, exactly. He left his work, his career, eloped with a serial killer who locked him up in an asylum,” Beau shot him a stern look, but carried on, “and a girl who he orphaned by killing her *also* serial killer dad, and he’s never been happier. For the life of me, I can’t make sense of it. But.” Beau finished the rest of his drink in one go, and poured more over the remaining ice. “It has something to do with you.”

“I can only hope so,” Hannibal replied. To his surprise, Beau laughed.

“Right, no, you’re not modest, don’t act like it. You know damn well what you do to my son.” At this, Hannibal bent his head down. Losing his own father, having a very distant relationship with his uncle, and never letting himself get into a position where people can put him down, it felt very strange indeed to feel abashed. He decided it was something about the Graham men.

“I… cherish each moment with him,” he said, choosing his words with more care than usual, aiming for absolute honesty because anything less, and he was being called out for it. “He brings out the best in me, too. When we are together, I feel complete. At peace, in a way I had never been since I can remember.” He paused, introspective. “There’s… no space for remorse, or mourning for the past. Only what we are, what we have, and what the future can hold for us. I cannot imagine a time when I’m without him.” The thought alone was disturbing at the very least, and he moved on quickly. “I know that he… feels similarly, for me. I meant it when I said that I can only hope he feels the same things, the same way.” This level of nakedness with anyone other than Will was supposed to feel intrusive, but Hannibal found that this confession- for that’s what it was- to Beau felt relieving like a weight being lifted from his shoulders, like the way he thought the sinners felt when they confessed to their priest. “Nothing could be better than knowing that I make him as happy as he makes me.”

Beau, for all he would have been justified in being unsettled by the intimacy and intensity with which Hannibal spoke, grinned and, to Hannibal’s shock- yes, *shock*- reached to pat his hand. It was such a fatherly gesture that Hannibal had no idea how to react, and opted for his signature blank face.

“It’s settled, then,” Beau said. “I expect you to buy my tickets.”

The non-sequitur left Hannibal lost. “I’m afraid I don’t understand,” he said.

“What’s not to understand? If you decide to do it in Paris, I’ll have to get there somehow, and I haven’t figured how to make purchases online yet. But if you decide to have it here, well, that’d solve it then.”

Hannibal stared at Beau’s teasing grin. “Marriage?” he deduced when the old man remained as he was, hand still on his.

“Why not?” Beau asked, and took his glass with his free hand to take a sip, the sharp taste doing nothing to dull his smile. “You’ve just told me your vows. Might as well make use of it.”

Hannibal looked down at the table, at the drinks and the knife and their hands, and decided that another confession wouldn’t hurt. “I was waiting for the day we met to ask.”

Beau guffawed, but muffled it with a hand over his mouth after a moment for fear of waking Will. “And, pray tell, when is that?”

“The 4th of April,” Hannibal said, not holding back his smile at the memory now. “Two years ago that day, I met the most irritable and testy man. He avoided my eyes and told me to mind my own business before running out the room.”

“He sounds smart,” Beau said, finally withdrawing his hand.

“That he is.”

Hannibal looked at Beau carefully. He had taken a leap of faith and been honest with him, and found only acceptance in the old man now. It was a peculiar feeling.

“Well, you don’t got much time. Do it, and do it right,” Beau looked away. “Make sure he knows that this thing you have is for life. Never let him doubt that, never let him feel insecure or unimportant. Don’t let this slip from you, or you’ll end up a grumpy old bugger like yours truly.”

Hannibal shook his head. “I will not, and you are not. You are an admirable and inspiring man, Mr. Graham, with yet a lot to accomplish.”

Beau rolled his eyes. “So you are where my boy gets his smooth talk. Had to figure that one out sooner.” He then weighed Hannibal up with a calculating gaze. “Say, Doctor, how do you feel about an early wedding gift?”

“I’m all ears.”

“You promise to keep it down. I mean it, hands above the covers,” Beau said, eyes narrowing in doubt, but continuing nonetheless. “And I’ll let you sleep upstairs.”

Hannibal shielded himself with whatever control he could muster up and with a perfectly sincere expression, said. “I promise, Mr. Graham, and I *always* keep my promises.”

“Off you go, then. Let a man drink in peace in his own home,” was his gruff response. It was an act. It was a benediction. Monumental. Hannibal obediently got to his feet, and gulped down his drink in three consequent gulps. He bowed slightly to Beau, and was waved away with a grumble, but it did nothing to dishearten him. He felt they had reached a long-awaited accord tonight. It felt good, if he was to be honest.

But what felt better was sliding into bed next to Will again, after an agonizing week.

“Wha- Hannibal?” Will startled awake, turning in Hannibal’s arms to face him. He felt warm with sleep, and groggily reached to touch Hannibal’s face in the dark. “What’re you doin’?”

“I made a deal,” Hannibal said, “but don’t ask me about it. Because,” he gave an anticipatory pause, “I’m sworn to secrecy.”

“Oh god, no,” Will turned his head to moan into his pillow. “Not you too!”

“There’s nothing to worry about, *mylimasis*, I assure you.” Hannibal said as he gathered Will into his arms. “Not a thing,” he repeated, and felt Will’s tense muscles relax.

“Better not be,” Will murmured, and was asleep in the next moment. Hannibal stayed awake for as long as he could, feeling calm and content as he reviewed his conversation with his soon to be father-in-law. He finally drifted off to thoughts of God, and how his sense of justice and righteousness was so delightfully skewed.

*

Over the next few days, Beau was preoccupied with Madeleine. She could be found in the backyard or in the kitchen, their soft conversation drifting through the hallway while the others left them to it. Or it could be Beau that would go out with her, to god only knew

where, and come back in the evenings after having dropped her off at her hotel with a soft look on his face.

Will, having gotten over his initial fear that his dad could be kidnapped and tortured and killed by the wrinkly old woman who was the mother of his child, didn't ask where he went, just as he didn't ask how long she planned to stay in the city. He did, however, check Beau's phone to make sure the GPS was turned on in case they couldn't reach him and had to track him down. He also checked his own phone for a few past acquaintances to contact who could help trace him in a more serious scenario. But overall, he was quite amazed at how nice it felt to relax with himself and just enjoy his father living his life as he wanted.

Things were civilized between Madeleine and Will. They treated each other with a respect that bordered on ridiculous if you asked Abigail, and was rightfully cautious if you asked Lily. They made it work, though. Will would graciously accept the odd tea and coffee Madeleine offered him, and she did not object to it when Will made himself scarce the moment it wouldn't appear rude. He figured his father was handling Will's communication with her, because Madeleine never approached Will with accounts of her past or apologies. She also smartly did not try to mother him, and Will appreciated their decorous conduct.

With Beau distracted, it made no sense for the girls to make it home before dinner time, so their days were mostly spent apart. Lily introduced Abigail to the wonders of hiking and theatre and whatnot, whereas Will and Hannibal went wine tasting (and Will had no idea how Hannibal managed to find one here of all places,) and took a medium-sized boat to the lake for a day of fishing. Will did the fishing while Hannibal spent his time drawing in the cabin, and they smoked under the light of the sun, much more flattering than the phone flashlight. All in all, it was a refreshing experience.

For someone who spent most of his life in voluntary, self-imposed solitude, Will found himself thinking, from time to time, that it was really bizarre for them all to be coupled up like this.

Living in the moment, it felt as though nothing was changing, but in retrospective, nothing was the same, and it reflected on the use of endearments most clearly. Will was reminded every time Hannibal called him *mylimasis*, for example, of how much had changed between them in the last two years. Abigail called them all *softies* without reservation, and this was the girl whose ear had been cut by someone who was now one of her many paternal figures. Miss Thomas, the girl who could easily have been their dinner at the beginning, had become Lily for Hannibal, and *ma chérie* for Abigail.

And so it was with a healthy dose of amazement that Will watched his father get ready for his wood workshop, and witnessed Madeleine Williams becoming Maddie for him once again.

"I don't know if they'll allow a guest into the class, but Maddie liked what I've done around the house and wants to come," Beau was saying, oblivious to Will's thoughts as he straightened his sweater- that he had said he would not wear to impress *Maddie*- and drew a comb through his white hair. "And I've been talking to her about Charlie and Meredith, and she says she'd like to meet them."

"Does she now," Will said, and met Beau's questioning eyes with a fond look.

“I know it’s fast,” Beau conceded, and seemed to notice the comb he was holding just then. He was just shy of throwing in on the drawer.

“You know, dad, I think we are more alike than either of us knew.” Will licked his lips, enjoying the sight of the gruff old man as close to fidgeting as he could goad him to be.

“What’s that mean, boy?” Beau snapped when it became obvious that Will enjoyed the spectacle too much to continue. He slid his fingers into his hair to mess it up as if to undo his moment of weakness.

“It means, that,” Will grinned, “I *also* know family when I see one.”

Beau hesitated before returning the grin. “So are you okay with… all this? Really?”

“As long as you’re okay, I’m okay,” Will said, and then did that one sided shrug that he emulated from Abigail. “So much that I will not give her the talk about hurting you and ending up in a ditch somewhere, though I think Hannibal’s going to be disappointed.”

With a frown, Beau waved a finger at him. “You are my flesh and blood and I love you, boy, but you and your fella better tone it down a little. Your creepy is showing. It may raise suspicion, and I don’t want the next time I see you to be in prison.”

“Duly noted,” Will nodded and made to leave, calling over his shoulder as he retreated, “Have fun on your date. Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do!”

“That- *What* does *that* even *mean*?” was Beau’s spluttered response. Will remembered a skittish boy who rescued half-empty bottles of alcohol from his father’s limp fingers when he passed out in the middle of the evening, exhausted and heartbroken, and he laughed.

Then he laughed and laughed and laughed again.

*

In what felt like no time at all, it was the last day of their visit, and what would be their last dinner together until Abigail’s summer break was fast approaching. Beau invited Maddie for the occasion, wanting to be surrounded by every person he cared about before most of them left. When Maddie accepted and expressed her wish to be responsible for the meals, Hannibal graciously stepped back and found Will in the room that had temporarily served as first Will’s, then their bedroom.

“There you are,” he said, and embraced him from behind. Before them on the wall, across the bed, was yet another hand carved frame, the picture it displayed recently taken. It was from the day they had spent in the backyard. Abigail had taken the picture- selfie really, because no one other than her had been aware of it until the day she turned up with a hard copy in her hands. She was in the middle, her eyes glinting impishly at the camera and she had slivers of wood in her hair. On one side, Beau and Lily were similarly coated in wood shavings, carving away at the chairs, heads bent over their respective projects. On her other side, farther from the rest, were Will, cross-legged on the grass and taking a screwdriver to the

radio, and Hannibal, on a folding chair under the tree shade, looking at him with a tender smile, the book in his lap forgotten.

“Some might say, darling,” Hannibal murmured into his ear, and placed his chin on his shoulder, “that you collect family like you used to collect strays.”

“Dogs are family.” Will turned in Hannibal’s embrace to face him. “And I’m getting some when we’re back home. It’s been too long, not that you were complaining.”

“And I won’t, as long as you are true to your word and keep them off the furniture,” Hannibal said, then added, “and the kitchen.”

“Hey, you never said anything about the kitchen!” It was a protest solely for the sake of banter. Will would never dream of allowing dogs into Hannibal’s domain, more for their sake than Hannibal’s.

“I’m saying it now,” Hannibal replied, also for the banter. He would allow the drooling, shedding beasts on the counter if it meant Will would look at him like this, eyelids heavy with fondness. Of course, it never hurt to open the negotiations with room for haggling.

“Alright, you tyrant, no dogs in the kitchen,” Will said before pecking Hannibal on the lips. “Speaking of kitchen, why aren’t you cooking? I’m hungry.”

“And I get to be the tyrant, is that so, Will? Your caprice knows no bounds.” He let go of Will, and collected their suitcases from where they had been pushed underneath a small desk. “It so happens that Mrs. Williams wanted to be the chef for the evening. She has enough sous chefs with her, so I thought it would be a good time to pack our bags. We have to leave early, after all.”

“Hmm,” Will watched Hannibal carefully take out his suits, already in their individual protective casings and lay them at the bottom of his suitcase. “I take it they are quite busy, then.”

Hannibal hid a smirk by turning back to the wardrobe. “I assume so,” he replied, and leaving one suit to be worn tomorrow, moved onto the shirts. Will came to lean his back against the wardrobe, and crossed his arms across his chest.

“Then don’t you think we could postpone the packing,” he murmured, sultry, “for much, *much* later?”

“I’m afraid we can’t,” Hannibal said, unfazed. “I promised to keep things between us chaste in this room.”

“See, I have two problems with that,” Will looked at Hannibal’s straight posture and serious demeanour and sighed. “One, I don’t understand why you would ever agree to that, and two, I don’t know what possessed dad to allow you up here.”

“To answer those would be to betray the confidentiality of my agreement with your father, Will, and I am not about to do such a thing,” Hannibal glanced at Will’s sullen face and

suspicious eyes, and inclined his head in consideration. “I can, however, tell you that I have yet to fulfil one of my obligations, and that my commitment to secrecy shall come to an end when I do.”

“Please just tell me you won’t start snapping pictures too,” Will said with a slight whine in his voice. “I don’t think I can handle another spy.”

“Give your father more credit, Will,” Hannibal said, moving on to the underwear drawer. “He lacks neither originality nor imagination. He already has a spy.”

“Yes, and I am worried what that makes you,” Will muttered and began assisting Hannibal in picking the freshly laundered items and packing them.

The smile Hannibal gave him was enigmatic. “I suppose we shall find out,” he said evasively. In his mind, he was already making a list of goldsmiths he knew operated in Paris, ranking them respectively by proximity, quality, and reputation.

*

“Oh, come on!” Abigail was trying very hard, not to be heard but to drown out Beau’s naysaying. Beau, having a displeased teenager yell at him from so close, grimaced.

“You come on,” he said. “I have the phone and the internet. I can now turn on the GPS and use navigation. I learned how to send messages, make calls, and take pictures. Now I have that page you made, and it’s enough. There’s only so many new tricks you can teach an old dog.”

“But Facebook is just the gateway to harder social media platforms. You need a presence in others as well.”

“He doesn’t need an Instagram account, Abby,” Lily said, backing Beau up and giving him a smile in reassurance. “Leave him alone.”

“It’s not like I said Tumblr or Pinterest,” Abigail grumbled, but thought better than to press the issue when Lily made her stance clear. Will thought that the wilful Abigail Hobbs bowing out of an argument because respected her girlfriend was a wonderful thing to behold.

They were in the backyard, gathered around the dining table, Beau’s prized handiwork. The chairs had been completed and varnished with the combined efforts of Abigail, Lily and the artisan himself. The designs were mismatched for having been carved by different hands, but here and now, situated around the table and each holding someone unique and dear, they were a well-matched set.

This patchwork of a family, however, *this* was Beau Graham’s *magnum opus*.

He sat on one head of the table with Abby on his left and Maddie on his right. On the other head was Will, with Hannibal on his left and Lily on his right. The first week of March had been milder and it was a warm evening. The sconce on the side of the house, above them, illuminated Abigail’s cubist artwork as well as their portion of the backyard with an orange

glow. The radio played classical music in the background, courtesy to Madeleine. Hannibal had been momentarily taken aback at her choice, and then proceeded to engage her in a conversation about the genre. She had been very pleased to display a different side of herself, one accentuating her high education, cultured ancestral background, and proper musical training. And in the end, Mrs. Williams had become Madeleine on her insistence and Hannibal now held her in a fairly high regard.

"Contrary to popular belief," he said later, leaning in very close to Will so as not to be caught gossiping, "there *is* some accounting for taste."

Will rolled his eyes at that. "Should I be worried that you'll leave my crass self for someone you find more tasteful?"

Will had expected his quip to be met with a flirtatious comment, so he was surprised when Hannibal's face blanked before he said, painfully earnest, "Never." The eye contact he held Will in felt significant, but Will had no idea what made Hannibal react so strongly. "You shall *never* think that, Will."

Will reached under the table to put a hand on Hannibal's leg, eager to assure as he said, "I don't. I was only joking, Hannibal."

"Please don't," Hannibal said, and then realizing that he had worried Will, softened up quite a bit. "You cannot control with respect to whom you fall in love, Will. I found, to my absolute delight, that the dreaded loss of control brought me to you, and you to me. I would not change it for the world."

Will smiled both at the sincerity the words carried and the words themselves. Before he could answer, however, Abigail spoke. "I thought we said there would be no flirting at the dinner table?"

"Abby, no!" Lily lightly slapped Abigail on the arm. "It was so romantic!"

"It *does* mess with my appetite," Beau chimed in jovially, completely contrasting his words. Will blushed and bent his head down, suddenly intent on inspecting the intricate design on the silverware.

"Well, I thought it was beautiful," said Madeleine. Her comment was what made Will look up at Hannibal and glare. Hannibal gave a toothy grin, first to Will, then to the rest of them.

"And I think this *pierogi ruskie* is simply delicious," he said. "My compliments to the chef."

This prompted a hearty round of praise for Madeleine's food across the table. Their audience successfully side-tracked, Hannibal looked to Will as if expecting gratitude. Will shook his head, but found himself smiling.

"It *was* beautiful, you lunatic."

Hannibal nodded once in acknowledgement, somehow managing to relay both solemnity and playfulness, and carried on with his meal. Will, however, drew in the scent of the daffodils

and daisies in the yard, closed his eyes and listened.

He listened to the animated back and forth between the girls about the distinctions between romantic and sappy, to his parents' recounting of having met Beau's workshop classmates, to a debate on which year was the best for vintage Bordeaux between Hannibal and Madeleine, to Abigail's hushed nagging of Beau to upload more pictures to his account, to discussions of Lily's upcoming audition for the *Rock of Ages* reproduction of the school's musical club, with mentions of billowing hair and shining like a star coming up now and again.

He listened, and when he opened his eyes, he found himself looking into his father's eyes.

Beau raised his glass of store-bought whiskey, and Will raised his. Even though their glasses never touched, they toasted each other's lot in life with conspiratorial smiles.

Once, the Graham men had been chained down by their sad bastard genes. Now, they were finally free.

And those genes could go fuck themselves for all they cared.

End Notes

* Quote from Hannibal's lord and saviour, Sun Tzu.

So! Guys! This was a wild ride for me and my longest fic so far. I would love to hear what you think <3

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!